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Yours Truly:
Fireworks and its Psychosexual Passage

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Yours Truly:
Fireworks and its Psychosexual Passage

by

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I dedicate this thesis to *Fireworks* for being such a great film and making me happy through this process. And to Parker Tyler…

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My mom and dad gave me a lot of nice and strange things, but most precious is a compassion for kooky objects and creatures. Without that, I wouldn't be an art historian. I thank them both for their love of nearly 25 years.

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Abstract

Yours Truly:
Fireworks and its Psychosexual Passage

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In his 1947 film, *Fireworks*, young Kenneth Anger – both director and star actor – enacts a sexual rite of passage, using film techniques, theoretical methods, and visual tropes that descend from the avant-garde—favoring especially Surrealism and its penchant for psychoanalysis. Through the popularization of psychoanalysis in the United States and the influx of European avant-garde culture in Los Angeles in the 1940s, this thesis explores how Anger used these channels of influence to characterize his own fantastic sexual coming of age. The thesis reads select shots from the film to propose moments where form, Anger's acting, and composition create meaning specific to an avant-garde, Surrealist context. In doing so, the paper identifies Anger's filmic and ideological influences, allowing a historically and socially positioned viewing of *Fireworks*. Finally, the thesis addresses the implications of the growing trend in the 1940s for filmmakers and actors to exhibit their intimate, often sexual dreams and fantasies in the form of avant-garde, psychoanalytic work. The project's supporting research includes mainly primary source material from little magazines, relevant avant-

garde works preceding Anger's film, film theory and criticism by Parker Tyler, and psychoanalytic texts by Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung.

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Are You There, Kenneth?

Imagination alone offers me some intimation of what can be…
André Breton[1]

When the little voice of Kenneth Anger finishes reciting a short poem of his, the screen turns to a black and white image of burning sage dropping into a restless pool of water. Thunder explodes just as the two elements meet, and the fire integrates seamlessly in an instant, the thunder still rumbling along with the sounds of ambient rain falling. The fire and water tremble with equal velocity and sheen, blurring distinction between them and arousing a sense of magical mysticism. The film cuts to a close profile of a seaman surrounded by pitch-black. His face tilted down to his right, he gazes at something beyond the frame of the camera. The thunder wavers and the lightening illuminates his face. The camera pans out, revealing him to be holding a motionless boy, delicate and infantile, as if positioned to mimic Michelangelo's *Pietà*.

The lens' zoom continues to jump further out, and now the sailor cocks his head upward and to his right, regarding the harsh weather with stoic resolve. The passive boy, on the other hand, remains flaccid against the raging storm, under the protection of his guardian. The couple remains dry and still, positioned just off center of the screen in the opaque darkness. The image is at once romantic and familial: the sailor a savior inhabiting the double, ambiguous, and taboo role of both fatherly caretaker and virile, masculine man. He stands like a superhero, paternal and sexy, saving the limp figure from the stakes of weather. In these first moments, the director begins a ritual: the burning sage demarcates a magical realm where the film's visual space collapses into

[1] André Breton, "Manifesto of Surrealism," in *Manifestos of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1969), 5.

indiscernible darkness, and time becomes murky—the image seems frozen, but continuous rain indicates that time continues.

Soon we can identify Kenneth Anger, both director and lead actor of *Fireworks* (1947), as the passive partner in this first image. In accompanying commentary released in 2010 he says of the film: "This is a dream I had when I was seventeen that I transcribed into a film, and I wrote the dream down and it's very close to the actual dream."[2] In the film he awakens from his slumber to see a series of objects – a plaster hand, an African statuette, and a group of photographs – that signify his unconscious sexual desire. At first Anger acts reticent to acknowledge their significance, tossing them aside as he jumps out of bed. But he eventually forfeits his denial and makes his way into the depths of his unconscious, where he becomes a somnambular fairy guided by his desire to meet the object of his most obdurately pervasive and forbidden sexual dream: the sailor. The ritual of *Fireworks*, ignited by the burning sage, is Anger's psychosexual rite of passage: from the boy waking up in his bedroom, belligerently tossing aside the signals of the desire that emanate from his unconscious, to the boy fulfilled, sleeping peacefully.

But the film, which is profoundly personal, extends beyond the literal recapitulation of a dream that represents a psychosexual awakening, binding his memory to a specific ideological and stylistic dialogue. Throughout *Fireworks* Anger, who lived in Los Angeles, draws his film into dialogues with people, objects, and ideas associated with a transatlantic avant-garde flourishing in the 1940s, making the ritual into as much an artistic and creative one as it is a sexual one. If the original dream Anger had was a space for psychosexual realization, the film is something more. First, he is *choosing* to

[2] Kenneth Anger, "Director's commentary, *Fireworks*" from *Kenneth Anger: The Complete Magick Lantern Cycle* (Fantoma Films, 2010).

enact a dream he already had, relaying this experience as one important and distinguishable from his other nightly dreams. Second, he is embellishing upon the original dream to make a film: camera angles, mise-en-scène, lighting, and the very deliberate references to avant-garde work and discourse all count as choices he makes to represent his fantasy. The presence of the European avant-garde in Los Angeles and the contemporary proliferation of psychoanalysis – often associated with the avant-garde – in mass culture provided groundwork for Anger to participate in a creative world that, proximally speaking, was nowhere nearby. I am concerned, here, with identifying the possible tools from the European avant-garde – particularly Surrealism – that Anger uses in *Fireworks* to build this world on camera, and for what aims he uses them to reach.

In drawing himself into the avant-garde, Anger inevitably plays a game with history. While shaping his identity by exploring his libido, he makes references to surrealist works and its discourse as they existed in the United States during the 1940s. As he plays "alone" in his room he collages together methods and myths from his chosen predecessors, like Cocteau, Man Ray, and Dalí, and ventures into the space of his dreams – his fantasies – to access his unconscious desire and write his origin story. In *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History*, Carolyn Steedman writes of the historian's search for identity in childhood history: "It is useful to compare [history] with the modern idea of childhood," she writes, "and the way in which the remembered childhood – the narrative of the self – has become the dominant way of telling the story of how one got to be the way one is. In the practice of history and of modern autobiographical narration, there is the assumption that *nothing goes away*".[3] *Fireworks*, which is an autobiographical narrative, registers with Steedman's work in two ways: first, Anger uses the film to draw

[3] Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 76.

himself into a community that spans time and space, solidifying and communicating his own identity by participating a dialogue that is inherently historical in terms of cinema. Secondly, in making the film he enacts a rite of passage, a sexual coming of age, that comes from his own dreams. In *Fireworks* he narrates a specific transformation through a sexual awakening for the camera's record, remembering his dreams and his feelings from before his ritual passage, taking inspiration from his "childhood" – here more accurately an adolescence – to account for his self.

WATCHING ALONG

The year was 1947 and Anger was just 17— or 20, numbers conflict— when his parents left town for the weekend, and he filmed *Fireworks*, mostly in his childhood home. In spite of his youth, he possessed a studied familiarity with avant-garde, and Hollywood, films. His grandmother, a Hollywood wardrobe mistress, introduced him to film when he was a child, sparking in him an evident passion that grew over the years through her close companionship. It was she who eventually supplied him with the 16mm Bell and Howell camera that he later used to make *Fireworks*.[4] In his unauthorized biography of Anger, Bill Landis notes as well Anger's grandmother's Hollywood roommate, Diggy, who served as a source of Anger's knowledge and excitement relating to the fantastic potential of film, providing "a constellation of movie stars that would become fetishes for the rest of his life."[5] This fixation on the spectacular transformed Anger into an obsessed double agent of Hollywood, and he would go on to write the secret history of early Hollywood happenings in his 1959 book *Hollywood Babylon*.

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[4] Roy Frumkes, "Look back with Kenneth Anger; and interview with filmography," *Films in Review* 48 (January-February 1997), 17-18.

[5] Bill Landis, *Anger: The Unauthorized Biography of Kenneth Anger* (New York: Harper Collins, 1995), 8-9.

In a 1997 interview with Roy Frumkes Anger mentions that the first film he ever saw was Sol Lesser's *Thunder Over Mexico*, an experimental work cut entirely from Eisenstein's unfinished film *Viva Que Mexico*. He remembers the outdoor theater vividly, and when speaking with Frumkes he seemed to revel in recognizing, even at a young age, the subversive form of Lesser's work and the film medium's capacity to mobilize emotion. His interest in this footage endured, and a few years after *Fireworks'* release, while living in Paris and working at the *Cinematheque Française*, Anger became the first person to reconstruct *Viva Que Mexico* according to Eisentstein's original notes.[6]

It was as a teenager that Anger inaugurated himself into a milieu of avant-garde devotees and Hollywood legends. Weekly screenings at Clara Grossman's American Contemporary Gallery provided a space for him to see "all the classic Russian films… and the French avant-garde, with emphasis on silent films."[7] Located in the center of town at 6727 ½ Hollywood Boulevard, the Grossman's space was known for the unique film programming piloted by the People's Education Center. Her gallery was technically a separate venture, but she borrowed a projector from USC and opened her building up to weekly screenings of films that the People's Education Center – an education initiative designed for workers – acquired from MoMA.[8] If Grossman's screenings offered unique programming, it invited an accordingly diverse crowd. In his 2005 study of minor cinemas in Los Angeles, David E. James describes Grossman's gallery, founded in 1943,

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[6] Roy Frumkes, "Look back," ibid.

[7] Roy Frumkes, "Look back" ibid, 17. In this interview Anger remembers the gallery as being the "Gallery of Modern Art." Though in my opinion not worth mulling over, it is interesting to note that in his biography of Anger, Bill Landis writes that Anger's claims of his grandmother being a dress mistress in Hollywood are entirely fictitious. It is perhaps an instance of Anger's relationship to history and identity worth exploring—particularly when considering his grandmother was supposedly his informant for much of *Hollywood Babylon*. See Landis, *Anger*, ibid, 4-12.

[8] James, *Most Typical Avant-Garde,* ibid. We can also extrapolate on the significance of *nighttime* programming and *film* as component parts of the gallery's operations.

as the original "film society" and an intergenerational nexus of film lovers that provided a yet unfulfilled need for films of the past from other countries.[9]

Alongside the populist sparkle in the People's Education Center's name, the gallery, initially funded by Hollywood Communists, had deeply embedded social and political aims that were only intensified by the film society's early takeover by Faith Hubley, Carl Lerner, and Dede Allen.[10] In 1997 Faith Hubley recalled having 800 members, enough interest to feature serial screenings of Eisenstein, the French surrealists, leftist Hollywood films like *Our Daily Bread*, and old American documentaries.[11] In this milieu, Grossman and the People's Education Center used film and the avant-garde as a catalyst, or at least a foundation, for revolutionary thinking to bolster a political consciousness among Los Angeles' proletariat.[12] Accordingly, the society's showings were deemed subversive and, apparently, treated with gravity. In 1946, after the People's Education Center was purchased by Barbara Cecil, the Tenney's Committee would investigate the organization for "subversive acts."[13]

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[9] David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde: History and Geography of Minor Cinemas in Los Angeles* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 216-217. See also Rani Singh, "In the Shadow of the Spotlight," in *Pacific Standard Time: Los Angeles Art 1945-1980*, eds. Rebecca Peabody, Andrew Perchuk, Glenn Phillips, and Rani Singh (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute Publication Program, 2011), 71.

[10] The People's Education Center was a project geared towards educating workers of largely political issues. Henry Hay, founder of the Mattachine Society, was an active contributor to the P.E.C. See John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States 1940-1970, Second Edition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 59.

[11] For some time they remained the *only* film society showing old, classic films. See "Faith Hubley (And John Hubley)," Interview by Patrick McGilligan, in *Tender Comrades: A Backstory of the Hollywood Blacklist* (New York: Saint Martin's Press, 1997), 287.

[12] I just mean to say that Anger frequented a space where noncommercial films were shown, and where film was actively acknowledged as different from a banal apparatus for the masses. Communism in Hollywood is a massive field in and of itself, and one outside the scope of my project. Anger has never identified publicly with a political party that I am aware of, and it is my belief that any such allegiance would only be secondary to the politics reflected in his films, which are unrelated to any party's doctrine.

[13] James, *Most Typical Avant-Garde*, ibid, 216.

Grossman's Friday night ritual constituted a utopian space where young filmmakers like Curtis Harrington and Kenneth Anger could mingle with established figures from a variety of walks of life, like D.W. Griffith, Lillian Gish, John and James Whitney, and Man Ray.[14] Grossman's gallery deserves more research, as its story remains largely unwritten. It was, though, a space whose leading figures posited film as the crucial medium to bind contemporary, avant-garde art to a radical political consciousness, located in the heart of the burgeoning mass entertainment culture in Hollywood. The American Contemporary Gallery provided Anger with a sense of the avant-garde discourse from which he would draw to shape his own early film career, starting with *Fireworks*.[15]

Though even less well-documented than Grossman's gallery, and unclear how much it constituted any kind of "scene" the way The American Contemporary Gallery did, is the Esquire Theater, where Anger first saw Jean Cocteau's 1930 *Le Sang d'un Poète*.[16] Of all the films Anger knew, Cocteau's early avant-garde film had the most

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[14] James, *Most Typical Avant-Garde*, ibid.

[15] An interesting discussion about the gallery and its film programming might address the pairing of American documentaries from the 1930s with Eisenstein's films *and* the French surrealists all to serve a distinctly communist agenda.

[16] The Esquire Theater is a mysterious place that remains virtually unmentioned in published print material on Hollywood. There is cursory information available throughout Los Angeles' online architectural historic preservation community, though. The theater opened on 419 N. Fairfax Ave in May of 1937. It was an independent establishment run by Betty Berkoff, a Vaudeville actress and the mother of Louis Berkoff, a producer at Monogram Pictures. Very little information exists about her, her business, or her family, but on the March 5th, 1940, the *LA Times* includes a promotional blurb for regular screenings in Yiddish of Sholem Aleichem's *Tevya*, suggesting the theater showed some Yiddish language films. When Berkoff died in 1945, Herb Rosener turned the Esquire into an art house—the period when Anger surely Cocteau's film. In 1953 it became Canter's Deli, which remains there today. Rosener was, from the 1930s through the 1960s, apparently one of California's leading distributors of foreign films, owning and managing over a dozen theaters. His company, on which I have found no information, was purportedly called The Fine Arts Corporation.
See: "Esquire Theater," Google Sites: Historic Neighborhood Theaters All Around Los Angeles, accessed March 29, 2016, https://sites.google.com/site/losangelesmoviepalaces/#TOC-Esquire-Theatre.
"Esquire Theater," Cinema Treasures, accessed March 29, 2016, http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/2358.
"Cinema Hall Theater Message Board," Cinema Treasures, accessed March 29, 2016, http://cinematreasures.org/theaters/5401/comments.

potent and direct influence on *Fireworks*.[17] Narratively, thematically, and visually the two films are remarkably alike. *Le Sang d'un Poète* follows a young artist searching for inspiration, beaming from the confinement of his studio's four walls into a fabulous labyrinthine dreamscape where he discovers, hesitantly, that the restraints of rationality need not apply to his imagination. In *Underground Film*, Parker Tyler interprets Cocteau's film as "a ritualistic parable of the artist's sacrifices of his libido, beginning with the fantasy sex of masturbation (the palm of his hand becomes a mouth asking for air) and ending in two phases of his symbolic death."[18] Cocteau's muse learns that in order to win the bourgeoisie's admiration he must ultimately sacrifice himself.

In both films the 'poets' employ paranoid methods of looking to invest objects with new meaning and realize their desires, ultimately confronting mutilation as a means of arriving at artistic self-actualization. For example, in the first scene of *Le Sang d'un Poète*, Cocteau's star (young beauty Enrico Rivera) obsesses over the metamorphosis of his hand as he tries to draw a face, finding his body slowly but adamantly merging with the image he draws. He furiously rubs away the mouth in his drawing, and then meanders away from his easel to answer his door, greeted by a gentleman dressed as Louis XV. The gentleman seems horrified by the poet's hand-mouth – though the poet himself remains oblivious – and instantly races away. Seconds later Rivera washes his hands in a basin, but air begins to bubble loudly at the surface. With exaggerated, melodramatic gestures the poet jerks his hand out of the water, realizing that the face from his drawing has transferred directly onto his hand. The closer he scrutinizes it, the harsher the mouth's

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Tony L. Scott, *The Stars of Hollywood Forever* (Self published, 2014). This book copies all the information from the graves at the Hollywood Forever Cemetery into alphabetical order. It is where I found information on Betty Berkoff.

[17] Frumkes, "Looking back," 17.

[18] Parker Tyler, *Underground Film: A Critical History* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1995, originally 1969), 112.

imprint becomes, and eventually Cocteau cuts to a close shot of the hand surrounded by black, the mouth delightfully pursing in and out its voluptuous lips [Figure 1]. Cocteau then edits together a sequence of shots of the poet fixated deliriously on his palm, the musical accompaniment growing increasingly crazed. Rivera loses his temper, flailing his arm about and shaking his wrist to test the mouth's constitution. Suddenly a high, breathy voice sings "*de l'air*," and the camera cuts to an image of the hand, now plaster, propped up against a Roman bust. Again, '*de l'air*,' and the big, caricatured lips mouth the phrase while propped up against a plaster bust that faces away from the camera [Figure 2]. Rivera holds his palm up to his ear, furiously trying to affirm it as the source of the voice—an act that only further aggravates him. Eventually Cocteau indulges the comedy of the situation, as Rivera relaxes his body into a chair and allows the mouth-hand to caress the surface of his body while his breathing intensifies. The shifty material quality of his hand becomes the portal through which Rivera's character eventually engages his desire.

Anger fills the first extended scene of *Fireworks* with countless allusions to shots and objects from Cocteau's studio scene— a series of quotations that amounts to a general, deliberate analogy between the two. The most important of these references is Anger's use of the plaster hand as a displaced object that represents his desire. Just as Cocteau's character uses his paranoia to realize the connection between his libido and the his own hand and image, the hand for Anger comes to represent an ambiguous image of his desire— it is what he *lacks*, but he must first come to recognize it as such.[19]

Sharing Cocteau's interest in dreams and desire, Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí implement literal psychoanalytic theories in their two Surrealist films, *Un Chien Andalou*

[19] The relationship between Cocteau and Anger was only just beginning. Cocteau would see *Fireworks* in 1949 and write Anger to express his admiration. Anger moved to Paris shortly thereafter, working under and for a brief period even living with Cocteau. Roy Frumkes, "Look back," ibid, 18.

(1929) and *L'Age d'Or* (1930). In her 1981 text *Figures of Desire*, Linda Williams analyzes these two "Surrealist proper" films to draw a lineage from pre-Surrealist poetic theory about the image through Buñuel and Dalí's two films. Arguing that the filmmakers compose these films by way of contiguous metonymic and metaphoric images, not diegesis, she focuses her attention on reading images and sequences from the films, and deciphering them through the psychoanalytic influence she identifies in Surrealist practice.

Metonymy and metaphor, in Williams' study, are the theoretical terms she adopts from Lacan (who built upon the work of Roman Jakobson) that are analogous to Freud's condensation and displacement, respectively. Whereas Freud's terms address dream work alone, Lacan, Williams writes, was interested in how these terms function as concepts within language that produce and situate "the self." Surrealist film, she argues, extends the displacement-metaphor and condensation-metonymy to images –honing in on the process of identification – while refusing to resolve the effects of such identification for the spectator. Most films rely on the process of audience identification with an image to shape responses to characters. This identification with images in cinema also, Williams notes, is parallel to the "formation of the self." Surrealist film, however, uses the same methods of relaying meaning in images, like metaphor and metonymy, but focuses on their *process* by deliberately ruining them, "[exposing] the fundamental illusion of the film image itself" and denying the myth of the unified human subject that such images normally bolster.[20] So while metaphor in images is always a tool that replaces an object with another thing to signify the former, it normally helps to situate characters and a viewer in a logical narrative. Cinematic metonymy, similarly, might consist of a shot

[20] Linda Williams, *Figures of Desire: A Theory and Analysis of Surrealist Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), xv-xvi.

where the camera pans over clothes scattered across a floor, eventually leading to a naked (but maybe covered) couple sleeping closely in a bed. Situating two things contiguously suggests that the characters passionately tore the clothes off of each other, had sex, and then fell asleep nestled together. These two elements together represent the whole sexual narrative that occurs between the stripping and the sleeping, without actually showing the sex act itself. Surrealist film deploys both metonymy and metaphor, but refuses the sequential logic on which these two techniques usually rely. In the prior scenario, for example, a surrealist film might include the long, panning shot over clothes splayed on the floor, but as the camera reaches the bed where the couple should rest in post-coital bliss, the screen might show something completely nonsensical, like a group of rats digging through rancid trash. The metonymic logic, which could normally identify the sex act as the signified, is disrupted by a non sequitur, which in itself may be a metaphor.

Neither of the films by Cocteau or Anger is a "Surrealist proper" film. Cocteau himself dispels the claim that *Le Sang d'un Poète* is truly in the league of Surrealism: "… surrealism did not exist when I first thought of [the film]. On the contrary, the interest that it still arouses probably comes from its isolation from the works with which it is classified… I was the only one of this minority to avoid the deliberate manifestations of the unconscious in favor of a kind of half-sleep through which I wandered as though in a labyrinth."[21] Meaning, the fact that *Le Sang d'un Poète* has continuously been classified as "Surrealist" has perhaps heightened the interest it has received. Opposed to the orthodox demonstration of Freudian theory by Dalí and Buñuel where metonymy and metaphor operate purely as if in the realm of dreams, Cocteau's "half-sleep" opens space for him to confront the same questions of desire as Dalí and Buñuel, but with clear

[21] Jean Cocteau, *Two Screenplays: The Blood of a Poet, The Testament of Orpheus* trans. Carol Martin-Sperry (New York: The Orion Press, 1968, originally Paris: Editions du Rocher-Monaco, 1957), 3.

ramifications for his character's conscious life. For Cocteau, then, the dream plays a much more literal role – perhaps performative – than the totally fantastic realm that Dalí and Buñuel explore. It is a method through which he can access objects in a fantastic way, but not wholly reject or displace meaning in the way Buñuel and Dalí do. In *Fireworks* Anger deviates from "Surrealism proper" in a similar manner to Cocteau, deploying displacement, but not to wholly undermine the logical identification processes that uphold metaphor. As Parker Tyler says of *Le Sang d'un Poète* in *Underground Film*, unlike *Un Chien Andalou* or *L'age d'Or*, the metaphorical value of the objects in the film *actualize* a logical narrative about the self, whereas no action in the two "Surrealist proper" films agrees "with any plausible scheme" or narrative development.[22]

BIG DREAMS, LITTLE MAGAZINES

Anger was far from the only person in the United States advocating for Surrealism's revolutionary potential in the 1940s. Conditions of the war led to the exile or migration of numerous leading members of Europe's avant-garde to New York City and Los Angeles. The years from 1940 to 1947 also mark the publication of *View*, a 'little magazine' in New York organized by writers Charles Henri Ford and Parker Tyler.[23] Their seventh and eighth numbers, edited by Nicolas Calas and published in 1941 in a single issue, were devoted entirely to Surrealism. Featuring an interview with André Breton, short essays by André Masson, Kurt Seligmann, and a letter from Georges Henein, the issue acts in many ways as a call to action for U.S. poets. Henein's "Message from Cairo" urges creatives to "take the gauntlet" and use poetic imagination to relieve

[22] Parker Tyler, *Underground Film* ibid, 138-139.

[23] Though it sounds paradoxical, Little Magazines are in fact a part of *mass* culture. They serve niche audiences, yes, but altogether constituted mass distribution to people from many different walks of life throughout the United States. They were usually very inexpensive, publishing and purchased by people who were not wealthy.

the devastation faced elsewhere in the world.[24] Because of its geographic location and prolonged distancing from the war across the Atlantic, to Henein the United States seemed an ideal place for an artist.

In his own essay, "The Light of Words," Calas includes a series of overwhelmingly passionate declarations, aiming to incite a drive in his reader to "overthrow" the old order to make a new one: "He will see fire in diamonds, read the future in flames, love in the heart, discover forms hidden in night… he will reveal all which is daring and heroic."[25] At the center of Calas' revolution is a radical reformulation of the ways in which the individual interacts with objects through her or his perception. He propounds an imaginative, morphological looking that recalls the ways in which Cocteau (and Anger) approaches his objects, and the freedom with which he perceives his surroundings. In his hand, Cocteau sees the image of the face transferred from his canvas. In his mirror he finds a vertical pool that warps him to another dimension. For Calas and many of his colleagues, this kind of seeing and interacting is heroic in that it refuses the constraints imposed by apparatuses that deploy logic and empiricism – the principle of "reality" – to wield control over the individual. The institution of 'common sense' would tell Cocteau that Rivera's enactment is not real—just a playful, maybe even naïve, fantasy; certainly, common sense would posit, Rivera's interactions with the face on his hand are not legitimate experiences. Similarly, to the "objective" looker, the burning sage that drops into water at the beginning of *Fireworks* might be no more than that: at most an enticing image, but certainly not the initiation of a rite of passage. Calas' visionary

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[24] Georges Henein, "Message from Cairo," *View 1.7-8* (October-November 1941), ed. Nicolas Calas. It is worth noting, I think, that these pleas to embrace freedom directed at artists living in the United States have much to do with the fact that the United States was one of a dwindling number of developed nations not yet officially engaged in the war. Had Henein waited even two months to write his article, until after the attack on Pearl Harbor, it perhaps would have been entirely different essay.

[25] Nicolas Calas, "The Light of Words," *View 1.7-8* ibid.

individual, however, recognizes these distinctions between 'reality' and 'fantasy' as an operation to control the individual's feeling. The visionary 'man' heroically undermines this program of straight looking with perceptions driven by individual free will, a practice that sits at the heart of the Surrealist artist's work.

The Surrealist issue of *View* functioned as a sort of manifesto, ingeniously directed at U.S. artists by an exclusive collection of work by European Surrealist émigrés and a select group of American poets with transatlantic connections, like Ford. In subsequent issues, *View* continued to take up the cause. The editors extended themselves into the realm of the Surrealist tradition by examining art and artists through the lens of psychoanalysis, embracing unschooled artists and poets, advertising New York galleries that courted surrealists, and regularly featuring figures associated with Surrealism, such as Calas, Tanguy, Ernst, Seligmann, and Breton. Remarkably, though, they provided a way of *looking* as well, casting an unconventional gaze over ballets, plays, exhibitions, novels, and movies from the perspective of both very young and more established figures. It was an encouraging terrain for both experimentation *and* committed unorthodoxy.

Though exceptional for its all-around caliber and quality, *View* was one revolutionary-minded little magazine among many that emerged in the early 20th century. In their 1946 book *The Little Magazine,* the trio Frederick Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn Ulrich define and categorize the mass of 'little magazines,' or 'advance guard' magazines, carefully writing the individual histories of some to find common ground. They conclude that the most pervasive quality expressed through the entirety of these publications is a principled sense of irreverence—the contributors to little magazines are working against an oppressive status quo to uncover revolutionary ways of writing and

thinking.[26] Almost invariably poor and, the authors of *The Little Magazine* suggest, frequently insolvent to the point of tanking, the little magazines did *not* make money or even enjoy any kind of staying power with a large audience.[27] Mostly, in fact, they comprised a "conscientious revolt against the guardians of public taste," fully embracing their space as one for poetic or ideological experiment unrelated to mass consensus.[28]

Ubiquitously influencing all of the six categories the authors of *The Little Magazine* identify as part of the little magazine trend – poetry, leftist, critical, regional, experimental, and eclectic – is the use or demonstration of a broadly defined form of psychoanalysis. A remarkable identifier of the psychoanalytic theme in little magazines is perhaps their potential pedagogical impact on their reader. Some magazines may have been stricter about the orthodoxy of the psychoanalytic practices that they featured, but the majority saw Freud's writings as a source of *possibility* for psychoanalysis to be used as a tool for poetic or creative revolution. Like Calas, who recognized an oppressive regime in the concept of an ocular reality, Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich identify an analogous pattern in the language of writers in little magazines. They argue that the "Revolution of the Word," one of the great revolutions of the 20th century, was inspired by Freud's belief in the unconscious' hold on an individual's desires for communication that are not intelligible (or technically even accessible) in conscious communication. Thus, to these experimental writers, the story imparted through conscious speech was "an incomplete one," forcing meaning and experience into words and signifiers that in fact *limit*, or "conceal," the ability to convey the actual experience of the unconscious.[29] The

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[26] Frederick J. Hoffman, Charles Allen, and Carolyn F. Ulrich, *The Little Magazine: A History and a Bibliography* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1946), 3-4.
[27] Frederick J. Hoffman et al., *The Little Magazine,* ibid, 2.
[28] Frederick J. Hoffman et al., *The Little Magazine,* ibid, 3.
[29] Frederick J. Hoffman et al., *The Little Magazine,* ibid, 170-171.

writers in little magazines looked to psychoanalysis for a model to examine how they could effectively convey feeling and experience beyond the oppressive apparatus of language, which they understood as mandating meaning and reality as separate from, or as an overly refined form of, unconscious desire.

No doubt these ideas grew further and further from those actually expressed by Freud. For example, Freud never believed that the unconscious could willfully be accessed by consciousness, so the idea of loosening the rigidity of language to answer the "requisites of the external world and the unconscious or inner life of the poet" does not reflect Freud's concepts in *The Interpretation of Dreams*.[30] But what the authors of *The Little Magazine* express brilliantly are the implications of the quotidian versions of the psychoanalytic movement as manifested in little magazines. Psychoanalysis, it seems, was viewed as a strategy for *the individual* to deal with everyday life. The "Revolution of the Word" provides a way to exercise power in conscious life and undermine the control imposed by the semiotics of language. I also think it is no coincidence that repeatedly throughout the text, Hoffman, Allen, and Ulrich emphasize the sheer volume of writers and little magazines; even the term granted in the phrase they use, "Revolution of the Word," connotes a popular, widespread – but still niche – use of these techniques: psychoanalysis, as a tool for refusing reality's constrictions, is there for *anyone* to use. Further, while the practice bolsters a sense of individualism, it also prompts a community amongst its readership and writers. Collectively, these magazines promoted a dialogue consumed with the question of, essentially, *how to know your psyche,* to the end of *how to be free*.

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[30] Frederick J. Hoffman et al., *The Little Magazine,* ibid, 172.

At the beginning of *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud outlines the influence of conscious and unconscious memory in forming dreams. His process is clinical and experimental: he cites historical records of dreams clearly affected by memories, followed by very simple examples of how he decodes the dream content of himself and his patients.[31] His clinical process was to investigate and decode the dream imagery and how it was narrated—an often semiotic procedure that reveals the source of the patient's trauma. Unraveling the coiled thread of dream images discloses inaccessible information critical to the patient's psychic well being. For Freud, the couch on which the patient rested was a space of self-revelation, of piecing the self together into a level of awareness beyond what the conscious mind offers.

Anger's exposure to avant-garde film, and the proliferation in the U.S. of Surrealism and psychoanalysis through mass culture – through the "Little Magazines" in particular – suggest some of the tools Anger used – in the case of Cocteau – or may have used, to make his film. I believe that identifying Anger's filmic techniques and potential ideological influences as they germinate from avant-garde practices constitutes one way of describing how Anger attempted to write himself into a dialogue, and in turn how he imagines an (avant-garde) audience for whom *Fireworks* might have been legible. As I consider *Fireworks* a personal narrative – a telling of his dreamed psychosexual passage- I devote most of my efforts to how Anger used the camera and editing to frame images and order sequences that formulate meaning. Anger's own performance as an actor is also integral to this method, as he performs his relationship to objects and figures within his created *mise-en-scène*.

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[31] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (New York: Basic Books, 2010, originally published in 1899), 41-54.

In focusing on Anger's choices and looking at what happens in the film, it is fair to say that my thesis is not explicitly concerned with the way *Fireworks* has been received over time. Though I am sincerely interested in and curious to know how this film can be used to posit theories about a growing, shared language of desire in homosexual subcultures of the 1940s, for example, I omit discussion of it because the film's audiences are not historically documented, and the shape of homosexual subcultures in the 1940s in Los Angeles are vague at best. This is to say, I am loath to be presumptuous about *Fireworks*' audience because not only is it undocumented, but also there is no evidence that the audiences we *could* imagine – like a "homosexual" one – are valid or remotely definitive categories in the first place. In fact, I believe that the audience members brought a variety of tools to their viewing: an interest in Surrealism, or at least the avant-garde, familiarity with cinema and Hollywood, and, perhaps, knowledge of homosexual subcultures. I examine *Fireworks* through the lens of *one* of these matrices, Surrealism, acknowledging that by the 1940s in the United States this term's specificity was mixed up in the broader designation of "avant-garde," and that it certainly was not separate from Hollywood or homosexuality. In examining *Fireworks* through the discourse of Surrealism and the United States' avant-garde, I concern myself with the individuals familiar with Surrealism, and thus the implicit audience I privilege is that of the avant-garde. My basic assumption, then, is that if we can successfully read *Fireworks* through the lens of Surrealism, then Anger might have imagined his audience to be well versed in this language too. From there we can move on to make more assumptions about the film's relationship to a spectator or community.

In my first chapter I read a sequence of contiguous images to find Freudian and Surrealist substance in a series of similar forms. By reading the way in which Anger might have intended for objects and forms to function, I relate his practice to that of

Surrealism and the bohemian avant-garde in the United States. In my second chapter, I take up the second part of the film, examining a still's relationship to a Surrealist photograph as a way into thinking about how Anger adopts the myth of the Minotaur as a strategy to communicate with an avant-garde audience. I also use Bataille's writings as a way in to thinking about Anger's mutilatory sexual fantasy, reading closely stills from the montage to focus in on the influence of psychoanalysis and Surrealism.

Chapter 1: "A Dream is the Fulfillment of a Wish"

[Dreams] are physical phenomena of complete validity—fulfillments of wishes; they can be inserted into the chain of intelligible waking mental acts…
-Sigmund Freud[32]

An individual, a family, a group, a nation, may be naturally "inbreeding." Each keeps a set or sets of images loved in various degrees. Here, I refer particularly to a genealogy of whose first ancestor is the libido. Coiling and tremulous, the eye of the libido is the king octopus of the soul. Therefore I am not surprised to find, visiting one of its tentacles in the masquerade of a beloved guest, still another image…
- Parker Tyler[33]

The transition from the *Pietà* image into a shot of Anger's bedroom is quick. Blackness steadily closes in on the pair and the booming thunder halts. Almost seamlessly a soft and solemn pizzicato string section replaces the thunder, and the upper part of Anger's still body appears, projecting down diagonally from the top right corner of the screen. He lies supine on his back, his head hanging slightly over the edge of his bed. The curves and angles of his bony, naked shoulders and collarbones protrude, sloping topographically in gray into his neck and up to his serene, angelic expression. As the camera pans away to create more space between his face and the lens, we recognize that he is in a deep sleep, and that the *Pietà* image was a window into his dream – a fantasy that leaves his own body vulnerable and eroticized.

The film cuts to a new shot, the camera peering down at Anger from the opposite side of his body. Extending across the frame, the soft flesh of his torso, neck, and chin take on a silvery, gelatin quality rendered as a sensual, semi-abstract image. His arm – positioned akimbo to where his barely visible hand rests on his belly – begins to migrate away from his body as he breathes heavily through his mouth in total relaxation. A close

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[32] Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ibid, 147.
[33] Parker Tyler, "The Erotic Spectator," *View* IV, no. 3 (October 1944), 83.

up of his hand appears on the screen suddenly. It waveringly claws at his bed sheets and flips over to slide up to the top of the mattress. The camera follows his hand closely as it moves up to knock a sailor hat onto the floor in a gesture so fast it is almost imperceptible. The camera remains stationary for a minute, the motionless hand peeking into the frame that is otherwise comprised of blurry space beyond the edge of the bed.

The camera's slow, methodical grazing over Anger's body makes manifest the eroticism of his dream in his physical body. In a sense, it is a second establishing shot: through a close up of his face, which is relaxed in bliss, we recognize that the previous scene occurred inside his mind and that its effect, namely eroticism, is embedded in this scene. Two very tangible traces of his fantasy remain manifest in the contrasting reality: First, his body appears in mild ecstasy; though conjured in his mind, his stomach bursts out and in with air as he claws at his sheets— he appears to derive very real corporal pleasure from his earlier fantasy. Second, the sailor's hat, of which the camera catches only a brief, teasing glimpse before it falls out of sight, further undermines the viewer's assumption that this reality is independent from Anger's fantasy. Here Anger proposes a paradoxical, nonsensical equation, at once establishing this bedroom as his reality, and the prior scene as his dream, though also refusing any strict boundary between the external reality and the imaginary one.

In this bedroom scene Anger introduces his dilemma, drawing a self-portrait of a boy who awakens from his dream lacking the figure that he must begrudgingly acknowledge fulfills his desire: the sailor. Three objects shown in succession – a fingerless, "castrated" hand, an African statuette, and photographic images of the sailor extracted from Anger's dream – represent this desire through Freudian displacement. Through vision extending from his libido, the objects incorrigibly nag Anger, daring him to indulge them through their visual resemblance to the act and object he desires. The

kind of looking Anger performs for the camera, where his unconscious, libidinal desire influences the meaning of the forms in front of him, bears important and obvious similarities with one of Surrealism's foundational tools: Paranoid-critical looking.

THE PARANOID-CRITICAL METHOD

In October of 1927 Dalí bemoaned "the artistic" as a medium between the individual and meaning. Instead, he argued, 'To look is to invent,' and he pushed his viewer to encounter the normal, or quotidian object with all the complexity granted by the "living eye," indulging the "subconscious" pleasure in looking and finding in these things the "marvelous and miraculous." A spiritual and personal technique, he promotes finding marvelous subtleties in the objects we encounter daily, refusing imposed meaning that denies agency over perception.[34] Two years later, in a delightful poem entitled "With the Sun," printed in *La Gaceta literaria*, Dalí's same approach becomes undeniably erotic and base: "With the sun, there is a little drop of milk standing on the anus of a sea shell." He juxtaposes ordinary objects that gush spontaneously from his brain, limning a filthy and nostalgic scene of carnal obsession.[35] Imagination, which by this point is deeply entrenched in the erotic unconscious, overtakes any normal understanding of the objects he perceives. His imagination has broken free of the social constraints imposed by language, freeing his mind to invent what he sees.

By 1934 André Breton had come to use Dalí's "Paranoid-critical method" to describe a similar kind of seeing, identifying it as Surrealism's "instrument of primary importance" wherein "the reality of the external world is used for illustration and proof,

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[34] Salvador Dalî, "My Paintings in the Autumn Salon," in *Oui: The Paranoid-Critical Revolution Writings 1927-1933*, ed. Robert Descharnes, trans. Yvonne Shafir (Boston: Exact Change, 1998, Paris: Editions Denoél, 1971, originally printed October 31, 1927, *L'Amic de les Arts*), 15-16.

[35] Salvador Dalí, "With the Sun," in *Oui* (ibid, originally printed March 15, 1929 in *La Gaceta literaria* 54), 73-74.

and so comes to serve the reality of one's mind." A mode of concretizing "delirious associations," Paranoid-critical looking grants the most deeply rooted, unconscious desire a convincing authority over objects.[36] The vision of the Paranoid-critical method's practitioner, then, is deliberately unstable; her or his visualizations oscillate mysteriously and arbitrarily between the materiality of an object and, alternatively, whatever deviations their mind not only allows it, but *desires*. This imaginative play of looking that opens into a personal encounter fulfills Breton's earlier projection of the ideal that Surrealism strove to achieve. In his first manifesto of 1924, he conceived of a state, akin to madness, where the imagination possesses total control over what the eye sees. For Breton, this remains the purest state of freedom, sharing the same social implications as Calas' essay for his artistic hero: resistance against imposed order in the form of 'reality,' or empiricism.[37]

In the same year as Breton's praise, Dalí painted over a plaster mask by Man Ray, depicting Joella Levy— the wife of Julien Levy. Calling it *Portrait of Joella* [Figure 3], he mounted it on a base like a bust and included it in his show of the same year at the Julien Levy Gallery in New York City.[38] Rising from a varnished cube-shaped wood base and featuring a little version of his earlier painting *The Inaugural Goose Flesh*, the bust's neck extends up from the sternum, the head tilting forward in a numb, anesthetized stare.

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[36] André Breton, "What is Surrealism?" in *What Is Surrealism?* trans. David Gascoyne London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1966) 83-84. Transcribed from a lecture first given at a public meeting organized by Belgian Surrealists, Brussels, June 1, 1934, later included in a pamphlet prepared for the first International Surrealist Exhibition in London.

[37] André Breton, "Manifesto," ibid, 4-5.

[38] Robert Descharnes, *Salvador Dalí: The Work, The Man,* trans. Eleanor M. Morse (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1984, originally published Lausanne: Editions de Trois Continents, 1984): 172. This bust was featured in MOMA's 1942 show, *20th Century Portraits*, curated by Monroe Wheeler. It was featured with two other portraits of Joella Lloyd, one a gouache painting by Pavel Tchelitchew and the other an oil painting by Campigli. It is a mystery to me as to why Robert Descharnes and Monroe Wheeler label this work *The Bust of Joella Lloyd*. She used her married name, Levy, and later Bayer with her second husband. Lloyd was the last name of her mother's second husband, though even he did not use it.

The figure's face is vertically bisected; on one half a sky expands upwards from a low horizon line, where a tiny, but disproportionately large figure poses, shrouded by her or his own shadow. The other side is composed of an aging wall of bricks molded to the bends of the figure's face, but a piece the shape of an ear has been punched out, revealing a deepened glimpse of the soft green color continuing from the other side.

The painted clouds merge with the shape of her face: a blotchy cloud extends to delineate the upper third of the bust, resembling as well a thin but bushy eyebrow. They rise continuously from the space just below her mouth, creating an absurdly massive sky. A horizontal crevice – her mouth – reaches wide, slightly above the shadowy figure, a protruding black hole in the sky from the shadows under her lips, contrasting with the illusion of the painted shadow of the figure below. But Dalí leaves space to interpret: this crevice could be just as easily a line of mountains, extending the horizon line well above my initial conclusion. A short zigzag contour in blue at the top of the figure's chin resembles mountaintops, covering part of a bright, almost effervescent triangular mass of white paint: clouds or snow-topped mountains? At the actual swell of the figure's cheekbones, the clouds become bulkier and more textured. They resemble scar tissue, striping her cheeks with bumpy inconsistency.

But it is also difficult to determine the perspective: Are the clouds extending closer and closer overhead, moving away from the horizon line? Or are the clumps painted against the soft green background hue actually pockets of sea foam moving away from the figure and toward the horizon? Is his landscape a long wet beach suffering from low tide, wistfully meeting the hot sun in the orange hue on her cheek? After all, the shadow of the figure, at once so tiny and so contextually massive, reaches almost the base of the distant blue mountain—an absurd length. Would it not make more sense for this mountain to be a little pool of water at her feet? Is the green wash then a view of what

lies just below her, the sculpted crevice of the mouth a strong cut in the sand? — Is this a change in perspective within the bust? Perhaps most rewardingly, the object becomes more complex, more mystifying, as the viewer dwells on it longer. On first glance *Joella* looks weird, maybe even ugly because of its coarse colors, but as one continues to look, the images on the figure's face become unclear and seem displaced, much like the way the images are illusions painted onto the actual shape of a plaster image, which is itself a representation of something else.

The clouds or clumps of foam streak horizontally across the figure's face, one slicing directly into her eye as the razor slices the female figure's eye, and the clouds bisect the moon in Dalí and Buñuel's 1929 film *Un Chien Andalou* [Figures 4 and 5], a moment Linda Williams identifies as remarkable for the way in which the directors draw a visual comparison between a totally sadistic act and an entirely natural one.[39] The clouds painted onto the face of the figure suggest a similar comparison: though soft and marvelous on the smaller plane of the image, they violently slice her face and blank eye with globs of impasto paint. Her face as well is violently bisected by the painted sturdy brick wall, obscuring the parts her mind that might reveal subconscious desire—the space the violent clouds inhabit. And as the spectator wanders the round of her floating head to see all the detail, it is her neck that seems to be almost violently impaling the base of her head, which hangs, again, drowsy and lifeless, as if in a dream state.

For Surrealist filmmakers, and for Dalí in general, examining visual relationships between contiguous images is the method most conducive to acquiring meaning—not searching for content or narrative. All the while, though, these images must be inherently recognized as *things* too. It is important, for example, that Dalí's bust is in the shape of a

[39] Williams, *Figures of Desire*, ibid, 70-71.

person's face because it adds to the shock of the violent slicing, while also undermining this violence by being plaster and, therefore, not an actual act of violence against Levy. The objects that Dalí paints open up to a field of new meanings that can be driven by, in this case, a sadistic, libidinal drive. Just as Breton's quotation indicates, the *illusion* of reality – Dalí's intense naturalism – serves merely to bolster the shocking nature of the odd combination of images. The clouds are not always clouds, but also pools of pigmented foam that disrupt a solid sense of viewing and, further, attack the figure's face through a familiar trope of Dalí's. As Dalí refuses to give the sculpture an absolute sense of any one set of meanings, he encourages, or even induces, a kind of looking that relies on the viewer's fantasy: as Breton's praise for the Critical-paranoid method recognizes, the object falls under the influence of the viewer's imagination.

That Dalí's method, or a general sense of it, can be gleaned by *looking* at an object or *watching* a film is a necessary factor when considering Surrealism's later adaptation by artists like Anger in the United States. This is because, as a defined system, the Paranoid-critical method has been molded only in retrospect, through collections and translations of Dalí's writings whose authors seek to sustain the enigmatic quality of the madness that was so decisive to Surrealism's development and duration. In *Oui: The Paranoid-Critical Revolution,* Robert Descharnes, one of Dalí's closest young collaborators, compiles the key examples of Dalí's Paranoid-critical writings produced from 1927 to 1933. Through his collection Descharnes demonstrates how prolific and continuously circulated the method was within the Surrealist milieu. However, in these essays Dalí almost never actually uses the term Paranoid-critical, and Descharnes' collection was not translated into English until 1984. So, even though it is believable that some of Dalí's writings in French – a language Anger read well – would have made their way to spaces like Grossman's gallery, a reader would have had to have been extremely

familiar with all of Dalí's writings and work to understand the Paranoid-critical method in the same way that Descharnes' collection provides.

Further, by the mid-1940s, Dalí had long fallen out of favor with Breton and was excluded from discussions in the United States surrounding surrealism where Breton held any influence. *View*, for all of its attention to Surrealists, for example, published only *one* mention of Dalí: Nicolas Calas' scathing article "Anti-Surrealist Dalí."[40] Still, though, the method for which Breton praised Dalí in 1934, and which Dalí continued to embody more and more publicly into the 1940s, remained attached to Surrealism. In a special issue of *View* focused on Yves Tanguy and Pavel Tchelitchew, Breton wrote, "Until Tanguy, the object, whatever external shocks it had undergone, remained in the last analysis distinct, prisoner of its identity. In Tanguy we enter for the first time a world of total latency."[41] Breton hails Tanguy for the manner in which he approaches the latent mind's omnipotence over its perception of objects; "Chez Tanguy, under the same lichen you will find the monster, the drinking-glass and the shoe."[42] Much like the double image of Dalí, in the form of Tanguy's figures one can find any number of alternative images, indulging latent, unconscious desires to see what may not materially be there. The method once wholly attributable to and synonymous with the work and personality of Salvador Dalí had travelled to new terrain for new audiences and purposes. By the early 1940s in *View,* Surrealism's most significant doctrine had moved from the Paranoid-critical method into a looser model of the imagination's freedom over perception.

This is all to say that Dalí's Paranoid-critical method was *not* a formal concept of which a young American artist in the 1940s – like Kenneth Anger – would have been

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[40] Nicolas Calas, "Anti-Surrealist Dalí," *View* I no. 6 (June 1941).
[41] Andre Breton, "What Tanguy Veils and Reveals," *View* II no. 2 (May 1942).
[42] Andre Breton, "What Tanguy," ibid.

directly aware.[43] As a staple of Surrealism, though, the method influenced work and thinking beyond the Dalí's writing and visual work, extending into the U.S. avant-garde as a revolutionary device for engaging with the world—a strategy for everyay life. For me the term is a tool to establish a connection between Surrealists and these later artists, both of whom operate with the conviction that the eye can be an extension of the unconscious. Anger's engagement with Dalí's method is therefore neither direct nor exact, but rather a loose essence that maintains the same shape: that the imagination controls what the eye sees, and imagination is controlled by desire.

What is enticing about using Dalí's method while distancing it from Anger's film is that it reminds how removed Anger is from Surrealism by various degrees of time, geography, language, and visibility – suggesting that Anger adopted the method of imaginative, seemingly paranoid looking from a variety of sources. Anger was *not* directly invested in the Paranoid-critical method's rhetorical, written history, but he probably identified its characteristics in things he saw – like Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poète* – as a way of living and interacting that he could use to subvert the oppressive regime of reality while performing a sort of ritual. In *Fireworks*, Anger does not draw direct ties between himself and Dalí, or any single figure. Instead, he takes an idea – one with tremendous implications regarding individual freedom– and uses it to illuminate a personal experience. His own Paranoid-critical method, then, becomes his tool for scraping to unearth his unconscious desire for the phallus. It permits objects to become more than what they are and take on erotic, oneiric significance.

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[43] A New Yorker seeking to understand Dalí could have found his paintings in Alfred Barr's 1936 MOMA show, "Fantastic Art, Dada, and Surrealism." Dalí also had his own show at Julien Levy's gallery from 1934-1935. The geographical circulation of these shows' catalogues and reviews is hard to imagine now, but in 1944 "Abstract and Surrealist Art in America," based at the San Francisco Museum of Art, traveled to six other locations in the United States. See Jeffrey Wechsler, *Surrealism and American Art, 1931-1947* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1977): 64 n.3.

Positing a theory of vision in his 1944 essay for *View*, "The Erotic Spectator," Parker Tyler accounts for interactions between the individual and the world in a manner similar to Dalí's Surrealist method. Immediately identifying vision as a "preternatural" phenomenon, he elaborates a theory of sight and interaction based on a series of intoxicating encounters he had with an image of Audrey Buller's *Morning Glory* (1936), which was featured on a poster on the subway. Much like Breton's Surrealist madman and Calas' hero, Tyler's "see-er" is a figure of everyday life, navigating the world by perceiving what "is desirable to see"— "an entente between the things seen and the see-er."[44]

With Marcel Proust and Jules Romains as his points of departure, Tyler begins by considering *how* we see. He proposes that an astral light extends outward from our most intense natural desire, inflecting everything on which we set our sights, as if our external reality is a continuous photographic plate recording back for us only what shines out in our desire's light.[45] For Tyler, who dances from Audrey Buller's image through a libidinal line of images by Grant Wood and Magritte, to a press photograph of Veronica Lake, and to the symbolic representation of an "emasculated," castrated Medusa, this desire has much to do with seeing a feminine "male silhouette" in *Morning Glory*.[46] The connection is formal, too: stiff, erect shapes indicative of human bodies, donning some kind of hair. He examines the low angle from which the hypothetical observer approaches the artificial delicateness of the morning glories that crown the aged tree stump. The painting, he decides, is of Freudian stock, indicative of a tragic relation between the two

[44] Tyler, "Erotic Spectator," ibid, 75.
[45] Tyler, "The Erotic Spectator," ibid, 75.
[46] Tyler, "The Erotic Spectator," ibid, 83.

sexes. From the tree he is reminded of "the stubbornness of desire," and the tree's refusal to forfeit sexuality to age and stiff moralism.[47]

Tyler's method is not exactly the same as the Paranoid-critical method, but the two serve similar purposes. Dalí's technique, especially when described by Breton, maintains that some kind of external reality exists, but that its true function is to serve a reality existing inside the individual—a concept no doubt tied up in unconscious desire. Tyler, on the other hand, is maybe less sure, but posits through Proust a more interactive equation, where nature literally responds to ancient human memory and desire.[48] Further, Dalí's state, particularly in his Paranoid-critical writings, seems to extend from a fluid dream state, where images from his unconscious flow out in surprising ways, concretizing into shocking images. Tyler, though, draws connections between objects from his memory and what exists in front of him, but in no way do his associations seem haphazard or illogical. Though he retrospectively retraces the path his mind took to draw connections, they seem entirely reasonable and logical: all the figures embody, through their similar form, a kind of unresolved conflict of sex.

Regardless though, the two systems aim to contribute a way of interacting with the world in a manner that indulges, to the greatest extent possible, true, erotic desire extending from a central, uncontrollable part of the human psyche. As uncontrollable, indulgent operations of desire, sexual deviance arises in both thinkers' demonstrations. For Tyler, this comes in the form of seeing a pervasive conflict between feminine delicacy and the inevitable phallic form. While developing the Paranoid-critical method, Dalí's writings overflow with fetishized obsessions of excrement, masturbatory voyeurism, and decay emerging from his subconscious to take a central role in his

[47] Tyler, "The Erotic Spectator," ibid, 77, 83.
[48] Tyler, "The Erotic Spectator," ibid, 75.

creative work. In considering the name, "Paranoid-critical," there is a relation to Freud and the necessary thread he draws between neuroses, like paranoia, and sexual aberration.[49]

In the first essay of *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* Freud explores the root of sexual aberrations, rescuing them from the understanding that they were nebulous forms of degeneracy. Neuroses, he claimed, of which paranoia is a subcategory, are symptoms of suppressed abnormal sexual instincts—"neuroses are, so to say, the negative of perversions." Neuroses are a means of suppressing socially unacceptable sexual desires, simultaneously making these desires manifest in mental activity.[50] As critic Gene Swenson wrote of Dalí's method in 1966, "paranoia" is an expression of an "alternate mind." It is a way for the subject to concretize the most unconscious of dream thoughts into subjective vision.[51] The method permits Dalí to see an object in the way he and Tyler describe: open to the desires of the subject's libido. And for Freud, we see, this paranoia is an expression of the same unconscious libidinal desire—and one explicitly perverse. In fact, Freud believed that "the symptoms constitute the sexual activity of the patient."[52] Meaning, the state of being paranoid *is* the sexual expression of deviants whose desire for a sexual object are repressed inside the unconscious. In the case of surrealist methodology Freud's diagnosis of paranoia fits perfectly: the active Paranoid-critical subject is constantly amidst an erotic encounter that enables her or him to access their unconscious desire. And so is Parker Tyler's 'Erotic Spectator,' whose external

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[49] Translator Yvonne Shafir tackles this question in a note on Dalí's 1927 essay from *L'Amic de les Arts*, "Saint Sebastian," elaborating upon the erotic nature of his relationship with García Lorca and prompting the potential of considering Dalí's oeuvre through a queer, Freudian lens. See *Oui*, "Notes: 1. Saint Sebastian," 159.

[50] Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, trans. James Strachey (Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing, 2011. Originally Vienna: Deuticke, 1905), 41, 44.

[51] Gene Swenson, *The Other Tradition* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, 1966), 23.

[52] Freud, *Three Essays,* ibid, 42.

reality morphs into objects that please the his libidinal hunger. The difference, though, is that Freud's subject's paranoia is a tactic – biological and social, it seems – to maintain and cope with their repressed deviance, which *remains* repressed. The looking that Tyler's Erotic Spectator does, on the other hand, informs the subject of her or his desire so as to actually *free* their unconscious desire from its repression and recognize it in everyday life.

Constellating the ways Dalí and Tyler use Freud illuminates their shared qualities: a belief in a largely depathologized sexuality as a component aspect of the self. But they way they use Freud also highlights their fundamental differences: orthodox Surrealism versus the avant-garde in the United States, and their different levels of commitment to psychoanalysis as a means to accessing fundamental desire. Anger enters this dialogue, conveying the omnipotence of his most fundamental, "unconscious" desire over his perception through three shots of objects dispersed through his awakening. Though waking from a dream, he is not in a clearly rational reality, and these displaced objects surface from his unconscious to the extent that he can still recognize them as significant beyond their immediate meaning. That is to say that while displacement plays a role here, Anger is not enacting a scenario strictly framed by Freud's studies. It is entirely unclear – and deliberately so, I think – if Anger is awake or asleep. He awakens, yes, but he also encounters displacement, which only occurs in dreams, as one cannot access their unconscious on command. Displacement, then, removed from its strict Freudian root, takes on more magical, ritual-based significance, as it emerges in a scene that largely refuses Freud's stricter divisions between conscious/unconscious, awake/dreaming, in favor of a theory that merges these realms to the end of sexual self-discovery and freedom, with especial interests on the places where these states overlap.

OBSERVING THE SHAPE OF THINGS

After his hand claws the sheets, Anger's film cuts to a long shot that pans down vertically from his bedroom wall to his floor, which is covered with blurry photographic images, and then to his bed where he remains alone on his back, scarcely covered by his blanket. Finally, the camera extends down to the object that sits closest to its lens: a plaster hand with severed fingers, one of which lays a few inches away [Figure 6]. The brightly lit fingerless hand against the dark wooden table remain on screen in a close up during a prolonged shot, while a coy, repetitive orchestral melody in a low minor key mimics the slow, erotic feeling established in the shots of Anger's body, imbuing the castrated hand with the same eroticism. A medium shot of Anger in bed replaces the close up of the hand. His feet rest at the bottom of the screen, closest to the camera. Veiled by the white sheet he rests under, an exaggerated erection protrudes from his torso and throbs for attention until Anger, irritated and disoriented, sits up to reveal it to be African statuette. He looks at the object incredulously and, placing it to the side, sits up in a startled rush, his eyes searching his floor frantically [Figure 7]. Then, as he shoots up quickly, his upper body moves out of frame, leaving only his lower scantily clad torso in view as the music crescendos into a melodic resolution between the playful clarinet and the coy strings. The film then cuts down to a shot of the floor in front of him, revealing a scattered array of photographic images taken from the earlier *Pièta* scene [Figure 8]. Similar to the plaster hand, the camera dwells on these prints for a minute, again, at a musical apex. The series of the three shots shapes a sort of triad, drawing three unlike objects –the first two of which are entirely unrelated to any preceding imagery in the film – together and prompting a formal comparison to conjure a shared meaning.

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Freud and the surrealists alike were convinced that there was something organized and important to be drawn from the dream. In unearthing the unconscious, Freud discovered a hardly accessible portion of the brain to which he attributed sexual instinct and desire—a pre-semantic space of organization where the deepest sparks of violence and the libido remain brewing. Contrary to the popular belief, Freud found that the conscious, thinking mind does not entirely control the human thought process, and that individuals are motivated by a web of circuitry of which they are entirely unaware.[53]

Freud proposes that the unconscious can be indirectly accessed in two main ways: the first, which he argues in *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1900, is through dream work; the second, which he presents in *Three Essays*, is by way of neuroses like hysteria, paranoia, and dementia. As a version of the Paranoid-critical method enables Anger to concretize how his dreams influence the objects in his bedroom in *Fireworks*, the work of displacement comes to reveal Anger's desire to himself—from the realm Freud found to be largely unreachable to the conscious being. When Freud insists that dreams are "fulfillments of wishes," he recognizes them as an indulgence of unintelligible, unreached desire living a meaningful existence below the surface of things.[54] Anger's dream, we will see, is no different and enacts a meeting between his conscious self and his unconscious desire.

Displacement, as Freud elaborates in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is the repetition of an idea or feeling in a metaphorical or symbolic mode. The dream process chooses *how* these ideas are represented through specific forms, distorting the original object, which lies in the unconscious, by morphing it into a symbol or representation,

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[53] Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, "Introduction: "Strangers to Ourselves: Psychoanalysis," in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, eds. Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 389-390.
[54] Freud, *Interpretation*, ibid, 147.

which then can be read and interpreted by the conscious self. There emerges a semiotic difference then between the dream-thought and the dream-content. The dream-thought *is* the wish or desire of the unconscious, while the dream-content represents it—a transformation performed by a secondary operation of the dream.[55] The act of dream distortion, not unlike what occurs with paranoia and other neuroses, is an act of censorship that Freud examines exhaustively in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to understand its necessity. He finds the act of distortion can be far reaching. For example, a subject's dream can transform unconscious contempt toward a person into feelings of affection so as to disguise the wish that is unable to express itself.[56] But distortion can also be direct and parallel: when Anger presents the series of three objects that suggest phallic forms, he explores the dream's work of displacement through distortion in the latter of these two ends of the spectrum. They directly suggest a phallic form, an equation of desire that later becomes complicated and drenched in questions of power. The sequence of the three objects signifies and complicates Anger's desire for the remainder of the film. Though they all germinate from the same unconscious libidinal source, they work in subtly different ways. The question at hand in this sequence is an understanding of what the displaced objects represent and say about Anger's desire.

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The shot of the plaster hand follows and concludes the prior images of Anger in bed: his sexual satiation exists in his sleep, but as the camera pans over his body and down to the fingerless plaster hand, he makes it plainly obvious that he lacks the symbolic phallus he so idealizes in the fantasized *Pièta* sailor image. The hand's extremities are all chopped at the first joint, except for the middle finger, which is cut at a

[55] Freud, *Interpretation*, ibid, 323-325.
[56] Freud, *Interpretation*, ibid, 165-166.

lower point. The static, extended image of the hand contrasts with the fluid and corporal imagery preceding it, answering pent up tension with a comic let down. Flung carelessly behind lies the entire middle finger, whose stump on the hand looks violently castrated. Meaning here is twofold: first, there exists an allusion to the absent members through a kind of half presence; either the finger remains in part, or, as in the case of the middle finger, the remains are flung behind the hand. With this, lack and desire for the absent phallus emerge as component parts of the image. Second, the violent remove and haphazard appearance of the lone finger remind, in addition to lack, of the trauma of castration.

Anger draws a similarly humorous, and perhaps more literal formal connection to castration and lack with the following image of the statue-cum-erection. A playful jaunt around actual libidinal fulfillment, the statue teases Anger's desires, reminding him both why and how his sexual thirst remains unquenched. Less violent than the castrated hand, the statuette's form speaks to his own sexual excitement and the fantastic nature of its fulfillment. Meaning, it is in fact his own erection that emerges as fake—a level of sexual excitement that he lacks and cannot achieve in the "reality" of his bedroom because the stimulant -the desired sailor- is not "real." It is a play that at once constructs and deconstructs the binary of dream and reality, where the two converge in an ironic, displaced phallic form.

But again, what is the significance of the displaced object? It is indeed a representation of the phallus Anger lacks and desires, but what is the role of castration? Anger himself removes the statuette from his crotch, eventually tossing it aside, as if it being a substitute for his fantasy makes it irrelevant to and irreconcilable with his woken self. His own act of castration, then, where he neuters himself with the displaced representation of his phallus, is a gesture necessitated by his understanding of his position

in the strictures of *reality*. The phallic statuette is itself a fetish object; it is symbolic of his inverted libidinal desire, one he has yet perhaps to acknowledge consciously.[57] The hand too functions in this vein, suggesting that his woken self, in contrast to his dreaming self, is erotically repressed. Worrisome then is the manner in which the displaced objects seem to bubble up from his unconscious, invading his life in the most inconvenient of ways.

Through displacement, then, the objects signify three factors of his unconscious libido. First, they represent the phallus that he desires, which is absent from his life. Second, they are metaphors for the "castration" that must occur to erase his sexual drive in his real life. And finally, the formal allusion to castration in these displaced objects suggests that Anger *desires* this sexual emasculation—a desire he cannot yet articulate, or even fully accept.

The last object in the sequence of displacement is a group of photographic prints extracted from the earlier shot of Anger resting in the arms of the sailor. Of the three objects in the sequence of displacement, these photographic prints are the most literal, perhaps invasive, representation of what he desires, but ironically, the most removed as well. They are glossy, flat, and static – as if out of a beefcake magazine – and totally useless to replacing the absent, physical form of the phallus. However, they are a literal extraction of an image from Anger's dream, similar to Dalí's own painted dream objects that were at the center of his Critical-paranoid methodology. The prints are a decisive permeation of the wall between dream and reality to which Anger reacts incredulously—obtrusive evidence of his forbidden, unconscious desire seeping into his waking vision. If

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[57] I do not mean to equate his phallus with his libido, as such is not the case and even Freud maintained that castratos retain their libidos. I would argue, though, that in this case it is the symbol of the erect phallus that represents his libidinal desire. In castrating himself he is not obliterating his libido, just its signifier. Freud, *Three Essays*, ibid, 92-93.

Anger could ignore the castrated hand and then toss the statuette away from his body, the collection of photos, all showing the same image, is overwhelming physical evidence of both his libidinal desire and its omnipotence; a clear and playfully aggressive indictment of his libido.

But what of this image reconciles specifically the thickening forest of displacement and castration? The answer is diphasic, even if both suggest the same resolution. In the photographic image Anger rests limp in a prepubescent state—infantile under the care of a handsome and vacant United States Naval Seaman. As well as being Anger's guardian, though, the seaman is the obdurately pervasive figure of his sexual desire, multiple types of desire that prompt the sensual residue that cues the occurrences of displacement in the first place. Lying on the floor, the photographs point to the missing object of desire, cheekily employing their abundance to overwhelm his sense of denial and cruelly enforce his desire's potency. But their content prompts a second phase of meaning. Isolated from an exact moment in the dream from which he rises, the images force reconsideration of the *Pietà* figuration. Indeed, though the photographs are their own instance of displacement, the *Pietà* derives from the dream and thus contains, in that context, its own discrete case of displacement and wish fulfillment; it fulfills its own unconscious wish, descending from the "king octopus" of the soul.[58]

Paternal and sexual, the frame is a queered Oedipal structure, where Anger desires the affection of a paternal figure, symbolic of the phallus, imagining himself subordinated and helpless in relation. In this equation he returns himself to the young phallic phase of Freud's narrative of sexual development, but instead of desiring his mother and envying and eventually identifying with his father, he craves the paternal phallus, subordinating to

[58] Parker Tyler, "Erotic Spectator," ibid, 83.

its figure's superior strength in the space of his dreams.[59] The sailor, in his dream, is the displaced image of the paternal phallus, symbolizing Anger's desire to mold an equation of subordination to a virile figure of power. The scenario Anger presents echoes a question espoused by Leo Bersani almost 50 years later in *Homos*: "How, for example, does a gay man's erotic joy in the penis inflect, or endanger, what he might like to think of as his insubordinate relation to the paternal phallus?"[60] Yes, here in longing for the phallus and succumbing to its authority, he subconsciously *desires* the castration threatened by the paternal figure in the Oedipus complex. It is a great paradox: his libido yearns for the mutilation of its own displaced representation by a more powerful phallic figure.

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Though Anger's longing is introduced in this sequence of three images, the scene continues slowly with him dressing himself and sauntering dreamily around the room. The camera follows his movement through stationary rotation, where the frame remains horizontally confined to Anger's shin up through the tip of his head—well below the ceiling. From there, the camera changes positions a number of times, catching him at various angles, usually from a close distance. He continues to get dressed, at one point frantically bending down to collect the photographic prints and throw them into the unlit fireplace, discarding the most direct evidence of his dream fantasy. As he dresses himself the camera remains glued to prints strewn inside the firebox. The soundtrack consists of a sweet and lyrical violin solo, bolstered by full, sensational horns and breathy flutes underneath. The camera, now on Anger, swoons with the melody, rising up his torso as he buttons his shirt.

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59 Sigmund Freud, *Interpretation,* ibid, 278-280.
60 Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995), 6.

Mounted behind him is a sculpture he made in high school, *The Enraged Christ,* the circular form of which encloses him in an aureole, with the grotesque body of the Christ figure extending like a thought bubble out from the side of his head.[61] Anger stares straight ahead, dreamy and focused, as he buttons the top part of his shirt and tucks the billowy fabric into his jeans. He reaches into his pocket, removing a small object. The film cuts close, revealing the small thing to be a matchbook filled with broken matches, the heads ripped off at different lengths. His hand carefully closes the flap to show a label reading "UNITED STATES NAVY." He holds it in place for a second, indicating he too is reading it for the first time in memory, before tossing it into the pile of photographs in the fireplace, once again displacing his desire. The matches, as well castrated phalluses, have morphed from the earlier displaced objects to again force him to acknowledge his desire, if only momentarily.

A longer shot of Anger, the camera rotating from a stationary vantage point to follow him as he paces the perimeter of his bedroom. The image is ever so slightly tilted, and the camera angled from a low vantage point cuts him off from the waist down. Though Anger remains at a moderate distance from the camera, the shot feels especially tight, obscuring a secure sense of his space. As Anger moves, the cameraman must follow him closely and cautiously, jerking ever so slightly to keep him in frame. Anger moves comfortably and without pause, though, and accompanied by curious, fluttery flute arpeggios the scene's dreamlike mystery intensifies; he seems to be under a spell. Now moving with somnambular haste, he brushes by a large hanging mobile –surely the mass that obscured the camera's vision earlier- and through a hollow doorway marked "GENTS" in big, uneven lettering. The other side of the door is a wall of opaque

[61] Kenneth Anger, "Director's commentary, *Fireworks*" ibid.

darkness, and as he shuts the door the music fades out and the mobile remains rocking slowly in in silence. Anger, previously incredulous toward the unsolicited appearance of his libidinal drive, seems to falls into its custody.

Chapter 2: Bedtime Fairy

A dissatisfied dreamer awakes, goes out in the night seeking a "light" and is drawn through the needle's eye…
-Kenneth Anger[62]

I. Seeking a "light"

A miniscule *thump*, and Anger drops into frame. It is just after he enters the room labeled 'GENTS,' indicating that the space may promise the male body referenced by the displaced objects in the bedroom scene. Filmed from the waist up against a dark, pleated tarp, he looks down to his right, a pensive expression on his face, unfazed by his bare, unfamiliar surroundings. He glances to his right; the film cuts to a vast, black open vista with blinking lights,[63] recalling the image of the shredded matches that prompted him, in part, to venture from his bedroom. Anger looks to his other side, and the film cuts to another vista, some lights stationary, some buzzing up and down the screen like moving headlights. By editing Anger's gaze contiguously with these nighttime freeway views, Anger, though confined to a tight frame in shallow space, appears to be surrounded by an endless horizon of flickering lights.

The camera returns to Anger, who looks forward just in time for the film to cut to an image of sailor – played by sixteen year-old champion bodybuilder Bill Switzer – donning a sleeveless shirt, sauntering away from the camera and toward a painted canvas of a Western-themed bar's interior.[64] Previously silent, music creeps in through a

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[62] Kenneth Anger quoted in Alice L. Hutchinson, *Kenneth Anger: A Demonic Visionary* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2011), 25. This line did not survive the editing that took place after the film's premiere, and is not on the recent release of the Magick Lantern Cycle. Anger discussed this line with Canyon Cinema in 2004. See Hutchinson, *Kenneth Anger*, ibid, 237n4. As Alfred Kinsey was the first person to purchase a print of the film, doing so at its opening night, it is possible that the version at the Kinsey institute includes the full prologue.

[63] These open-air night shots were actually taken at Cahuenga Pass. Kenneth Anger, "Director's Commentary," ibid.

[64] Anger, "Director's Commentary," ibid.

crescendo of a foggy reed contrasted with an offbeat cacophony of strumming and breathy flutes, a soft and high-pitched sound tentatively layering the sailor's image with a dimension of coy curiosity. The film volleys back to the close up of Anger fixated ahead, suggesting the sailor stands directly in his forward line of sight. Anger darts forward, past the side of the camera, and presumably toward the seaman.

Anger enters into the shot from the side, slowly approaching the sailor who flexes his arms to showcase his biceps, his left arm stretching out of frame.[65] He and the sailor flank the screen on either side, Anger gazing on the seaman as the seaman admires himself, seemingly unaware of Anger's presence. Anger stands close to the camera under dim light, his thin physique extending beyond the image's frame, capturing only his chin down through his shin. The sailor's body also extends out of the lens' view, but he stands further from the camera, bathed in overbearing light and blending in with the barroom set, flattened to the point of appearing like a graphite drawing. Anger looks on, mesmerized, the bright light over the sailor as he removes his shirt and continues to pose. Whimsical arpeggios scale dreamily up and down while Anger scrutinizes the sailor's body with an expression of awe, confronting his desired object as if for the first time. Anger's unreciprocated scrutiny over Switzer's beautifully lit figure in the artificial-looking, strange space continues and, in fact, intensifies, as the sailor's poses send him into stranger figurations, and, after a cut back to Anger's face, the proximity between the two figures diminishes significantly. Switzer responds to Anger's gaze by showboating even more, turning and twitching his dimples in and out. His body becomes almost comedic, defined by the lights that dramatically illuminate not only Switzer, but also the

[65] Anger entering from the side proposes an impossible makeup of space: It means that the bar in the background extends into the vast space Anger saw when looking to his left. Though not central to my essay, the impossibility of the space as a 'real' physical entity is important because it implicates the editing's role in piecing together totally disparate spaces into a single setting that subtly creates an effect similar to a dream.

forms of his muscles, which more and more take on shapes of their own. The desired body exists clearly within the realm of fantasy: though Anger is in close proximity, Switzer's body is beyond actual touch.

Next the film cuts into a close-up of the front of Switzer's torso, which convulses in and out at the stomach with his heavy breath [Figure 9]. Extended and perfectly composed, the close-up is a playful contrast to the erotic image of Switzer's whole body, and completes the playful buildup of Switzer's posing. The shot shows Switzer's muscle definition, but separated from the whole of his body, his torso appears like an animated, meaty slab. Switzer continues to narcissistically obsess over his own physique, indicating and permitting Anger's own erotic gaze over the sailor's body. Further, the tight shot of the torso disfigured from the whole body continues Paranoid-critical looking, as the torso becomes less of Switzer's body, and more its own wiggly, active form.

The sailor's chest and stomach move constantly, like an expressive face. Downward cast, his nipples resemble beady, unflinching eyes, with the light extending brilliantly upward at opposite outward angles, shaping a harsh brow that extends into fierce horns. The space beneath his sternum, right where the two wings of his ribcage meet, depresses into a small shadow resembling a wide, blunt nose, and just below that the creases in his bulbous muscles shapes a large, varying O-shape, like a loud expressive mouth groaning inaudibly. The image resembles a beautiful photograph by Man Ray, which featured prominently in the seventh issue of *Minotaure* over the table of contents. In Man Ray's photo a naked torso is cleverly positioned in high contrast lighting to resemble a Minotaur's head—a semantic play on the combination of a human and a bull [Figure 10]. A bare chest bisects the frame, arms extending out and bent to thirty degrees at the elbow. Darkness cloaks the figure above the collarbone, drawing a harsh line across the shoulders to reach her arms. The figure's nipples face forward, emphasized by dark,

inverted pyramidal shadows underneath that suggest they protrude like breasts. Below, the rib cage curves down to shape an inverted cleft, forming another dark shadow. Ambiguously gendered, the figure's sternum etches uneven creases into the body, just beneath where the shadow cuts off. The image, like Anger's capture of Switzer's back, is a delightful trick. The bulky shadows and extended arms mimic the long face of the Minotaur and her powerful curved horns.[66]

No doubt influenced by the accessibility of antique imagery in Paris, the mythical Minotaur was also an alluring figure in Surrealist discourse, one most propagated through *Minotaure*'s success from 1933 until the advent of World War II.[67] Founded by Albert Skira and edited by André Breton and Pierre Mabille, *Minotaure* introduced new Surrealist affiliates, including the first published essays by Lacan, numerous photos by Man Ray, and prints of work by Kurt Seligmann. It also maintained a steady dialogue with Surrealism's foundational people; Paul Eluard, Paul Valéry, Salvador Dalí, and editor André Breton himself all wrote regularly for the magazine. Large, expensive, and comprised of pages alternating between color images and dense writings, *Minotaure* rigorously approached a variety of subjects, from texts on modern art, to "The Hat of the Pope and the Hats of the Queen,"[68] and to more outrageous essays like "The Sadism of Urs Graf," the Swiss Renaissance goldsmith.[69] Though an image of a Minotaur is featured on every cover – always rendered by a famous artist – the mythical beast is

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[66] Man Ray's is one of a number of Surrealist, black-and-white photographs that uses a close-up of part of a woman's nude body to create a double image.

[67] Suzanne L. Marchand's 2003 *Down From Olympus: Archaeology and Philhellenism in Germany, 1750-1970* is an enthralling account of the lineage of Graecophilia and Philhellenism, from 18th century translations and enduring educational initiatives to read Latin and Ancient Greek, through the National Socialist party's claims to Roman mythology and the Cold War's troubling inheritance of this cultural obsession.

[68] Edward James, "Le Chapeau du Peuple et les Chapeaux de la Reine," *Minotaure* Volume 2 no. 9, 1936, 54-59.

[69] Pierre Courthion, "Le Sadisme d'Urs Graf," *Minotaure* Volume 2 No. 6, 1934, 35-37.

curiously absent from the text inside the magazine. It would be unfair to call the naming of the magazine random or unfitting, though, as Skira remembers the unanimity by which the magazine's founders chose the title: "when Roger Vitrac came up with *Minotaure*, we all agreed it sounded more inspired [than Picasso's earlier idea]." Picasso, he claims, immediately jumped with inspiration and created a whole series of Minotaur images.[70] The myth, which would normally, with Athenian moralism, revolve around Minos or the love of Theseus and Ariadne, becomes weirdly obscured by the single, unlikely image of the Minotaur. Troubling and abject, the Minotaur becomes a surrealist icon—the label under which ambitious and revolutionary psychoanalytic exploration and dialogue begins, dispersed through avant-garde circles.

Published in 1935 and designed entirely by Joan Miró, the editors dedicated the issue that includes Man Ray's photo to "La côté nocturne de la nature," including essays and images dealing in the romantic potential for darkness in various disciplines across the arts and sciences. The articles and images turned to the theme of performing psychoanalytic work as a source of knowing—engaging situations where the subject is lost in darkness and as a result comes to know themselves in unexpected ways. The imagined reader for these articles, an individual analyzing their unconscious to find the unknown, is analogous to an iteration of Theseus wandering through the dark, unknown labyrinth before battling the Minotaur to save his own life. The magazine represents its own labyrinth: a challenge of self-exploration for the reader to confront her or his deepest desire by way of individual analysis, or psychosexual endeavor.

In the history of Greek myth the Minotaur is an icon and symbol central to a story edited, extended, and repurposed drastically over time. *Taurus Minoos*, the "bull of

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[70] Albert Skira, "Introduction," in *Minotaure: Authorized Reprint in Four Volumes* (New York: Arno Press, 1968).

Minos," is the child of Minos' wife, Pasiphae, who falls in love with something – a bull? the sea? – resulting in an adulterated pregnancy and a half bull, half human baby. Over time the image of the Minotaur congeals to become a bipedal man on his lower half and a bull on his upper half, and the myth takes shape as one concerning the nature of Minos' precarious retribution over his wife and the Minotaur. In its fullest profile, narrated by the ancient historian Diodorus in *Bibliotheca historica*, Poseidon demands annual sacrifices of Minos' best bull, but when Minos fails to provide this Poseidon punishes him by returning the lame bull and driving Pasiphae to fall in love with it, aided by a device from Daedalus – the mythic Athenian craftsman – that allows the two to mate. Upon the Minotaur's birth, Daedalus builds a labyrinth in Crete to house the bizarre beast. Meanwhile, the Athenians fall on hard times, and Apollo advises them that they must appease Minos to escape their perils. Minos demands the sacrifice of seven youths and seven maidens every nine years to the Minotaur, a demand that forces the young Athenians to wander through the labyrinth to meet their deaths.[71]

The Minotaur is wretched: living solitarily at the center of his dank dwelling, his only notable function is to consume innocent boys and girls. He is dangerously powerful; tall like a man, and heavy and combative like a bull. He permeated theater, poetry, and visual art during the Hellenistic age, and over time his sacrificial virgins became heroic symbols of Athenian endurance, nobility, and strength. The myth's power culminated in the figure of Theseus, whose iconic figure ventures determinedly to the center of the labyrinth to slaughter the Minotaur, so as to save himself to live with his young love, Ariadne. He endures tremendous hardship and wagers a difficult, bloody battle to

[71] Timothy Gantz, *Early Greek Myth: A Guide to Literary and Artistic Sources Volume One* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), 260-263.

slaughter the Minotaur to free himself, thereby realizing his love.[72] The archetypes of this extended ancient parable grant, notably, a heroism to the one who challenges power and endures mental hardship. It rewards self-sacrifice and finds truth in pain. It also rewards confrontation with the dangerous and seductive illusive beast that lives at the center of darkness.[73]

But to the Surrealists, he was also the product of an illicit, disturbing sexual act that impresses his image with unique sexuality—carnal and abject. After all, his "consumption" of virgin boys and girls is beyond just chewing on them.[74] If the Minotaur is the figure that the individual meets at the center of the labyrinth, analogous to the deepest recession of the unconscious, then the Minotaur carries the inevitable sexual import of sexuality and libido. Man Ray's photo is one of the sexier Minotaur images of the Surrealist oeuvre. The body – a woman's, though not immediately apparent – splays ambiguously into a position both vulnerable and powerful.[75] The figure's arms extend outward like the horns of the Minotaur, and like the bodybuilder in *Fireworks*, dominating the photograph's composition like a staunch assertion of power. The camera's low angle grants the figure an imposing presence— the viewer, no matter how she or he holds the magazine, observes from a depressed position with the figure's face menacingly obscured. Yet the body in the image is also fragile. Hair from the figure's underarms buds downward in an unruly erotic disruption of the Minotaur's smooth silvery skin, moving toward its hardened nipples. The harsh shadow under its rib cage

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[72] Gantz, ibid, 260-263.

[73] This history is not a fixation of my argument, but I include it because the myth of the Minotaur today is one entirely edited and selected from a much longer Ancient Greek narrative. Erudite Europeans, like the Surrealists, would have read Ancient Greek and been intimate with the Minotaur in myth. Their understanding of the Minotaur was much different from ours today because they worked from a different set of texts.

[74] Gantz, *Early Greek Myth,* ibid, 266-268.

[75] To the circle of sexist Surrealist men, this was almost inherently erotic subject matter.

(the mouth of the Minotaur) indicates a deep, ecstatic exhale fleeing uncontrollably from the lungs of the model, as her arms remain pinned above her head. When one encounters the image, they can oscillate between being below and on top of the figure—between dominance and passivity. Though a female nude, the figure's gender and power ambiguity lends itself to undermining the nude's sexual legibility, toying with the heterosexual male viewer's sexual desire.

With images like Man Ray's, the Minotaur undergoes an interesting inversion: what had made it repulsive suddenly locates it at the center of desire—its abject, indefinable monstrosity and cruel, perverse sexuality are the components that dare the individual's psyche to explore its desire by reading the magazine's contents. On *Minotaure*'s cover, the beast often poses rabidly, luring the reader into the labyrinth for a tantalizing and perhaps sadistic investigation of her or his own mind. Useful to the Surrealists and the goals of psychoanalysis, the figure stands for inward investigation and positions desire as the most unstable but central aspect of the human psyche: though once assumed to be undesirable, knowledge of the unconscious propels the Minotaur's allegorical image into that of seductive allure.

Anger's use of the Minotaur allegory is complex, but not wholly unique. Like Man Ray, he takes an object of his desire – the sailor – and frames a disfigured part of his body to "resemble" the Minotaur icon. The sailor, a figure from Anger's original dream that derived in part from seeing the intense press coverage of the Zoot Suit Riots in 1943, was an image of virile masculinity that also sat comfortably in the realm of pernicious gang violence. Infuriated by the influx of Mexican migrants into California and the U.S. military, white servicemen – usually Navy or Marines – communed in groups to assault

nicely dressed, lone Mexican men.[76] The drama was intense, and featured nearly everyday in the *Los Angeles Times* over that summer, provoking public discussions of racial prejudice and, of course, painful evasions of these discussions. Though eventually the sailor becomes violent and pack-oriented, in the scene where Anger draws a visual parallel to the Surrealist Minotaur, the sailor is still only a narcissistic beauty that enthralls Anger in the depths of a mysterious space. So though Anger's sailor derives from his dream, Anger's choice to frame the sailor as a Minotaur, perhaps based upon a Surrealist's photograph, aligns him with the movement *and* their deployment of the Minotaur as a figure of desire awaiting the individual at the end of a psychological passage. Myth, then, enables Anger to turn his personal, intimate sexual fantasy into a shared human narrative about fulfilling desire and completing a psychological rite of passage.

The intersections of myth, film, and art were topical issues by the end of the World War II. In his 1947 book *Magic and Myth of the Movies* Parker Tyler insisted, "the true field of the movies is not *art* but *myth*," an enduring prototype of fiction perpetuating an "imaginative truth" that inhabits the psyche. Where art involves deliberate and conscious engagement, myth serves the pervasive unconscious lust for the supernatural present in all humans. The figure of Diana, for example, Tyler notes, represents something well beyond her individual iterations and is constantly repurposed in Hollywood movies.[77] The movies' function is to mesmerize the mind by placating it with

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[76] Kenneth Anger, "Director's Commentary," ibid. This is how Anger described and presumably understood the situation. It of course was a much more complicated moment that circulated spectacularly in print media. Though I explain it as a *thematic* influence on *Fireworks*, I am totally aware that Anger could have seen images of victims and sailors that also inspired the film's visuals. In fact, I believe it is more than likely that such is the case. From what I can tell from the *Los Angeles Times*, though, images from the scenes of these attacks were scarce, while images of sailors and *pachucas/os* were somewhat common, though not regular. I imagine more sensationalist tabloids and magazines published more graphic content that Anger saw and used as fodder for his imagination.

[77] Parker Tyler, *Magic and Myth of the Movies* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1947), ix-xii.

reiterations of these presumably biologically engrained, shared "imaginative truths"—which in fact are always fictional. Tyler suggests that myth is natural, or inherent in humans, arguing that theater managers respond to "primitive" inclinations of the audience by darkening the auditorium and encouraging the spectator to relax—a passivity that mimics sleep and engages unconscious drives.[78] When attached as an adjective to a fifth rate novel, he says, myth can of course go wrong, but Tyler actually sees Hollywood and cinema at large as fulfilling a vital, ritual function in modern society. Myth is exploited by filmmakers precisely to appeal to a desire already present in mass audiences—regardless of its inherent artifice, myth makes narratives legible, instantly familiarizes characters, and mobilizes emotions.[79] Myth is a formulaic structure of emotions at the heart of human lust.[80]

Tyler's notion of the "imaginative truth," positing myth as a prototypic construct inherent to the human brain resembles Carl Jung's earlier conception of "a mass dream of the people" that rests inevitably at base of all fantasy and myth.[81] In the ambitious first chapter of *Psychology of the Unconscious*, Jung posits a binary between empiricism – or "technic" – and an ancient narrative form concerned not "with the outer course of things," but *subjective fantasy*—what he identifies as "myth." The former, he argues, has been cultivated through centuries of education seeking empirical truth and science; the latter, a mode prevalent in antiquity, refuses this notion of a single "real" in favor of

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[78] Here Tyler refers explicitly to commercial movies, *not* avant-garde films, and the ways fine artists, like Anger, invert myth to their benefit are outside the book's scope.

[79] Tyler, *Magic and Myth*, ibid, x.

[80] Though I omit it here, the notion of myth by 1947 would be gravely associated with Nationalism and Nazism. Certainly Tyler recognized the capability to myth, as an emotional agent, to indoctrinate political subjects. Anger may or may not have been aware of this when making *Fireworks* and adopting the myth of the Minotaur, but while living in Europe in the 1950s he studied Nazi film astutely.

[81] Jung, *Psychology of the Unconscious*, trans. Beatrice M. Hinkle, MD (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1916), 30.

personal subjectivity.[82] This is not to say that the cultivated, empirical language Jung describes is not personal too—it is. The individual always has a personal thought or idea, but as she or he attempts to communicate their ideas they must transform them into language that, over time, has come to hold implicit power and truth in the certainty of "reality." The dream state assumes great importance for Jung, who, like Tyler, understands passive, relaxed conditions as the moment when the individual's unconscious is most active. For Jung, this state is when the mind frees itself of "technic" and indulges fantasy, connecting with the beautiful, utopian idea of shared dreams and myths.

Anger's sailor and the myth of the Minotaur, though, are not so easily understood. In fact, it can take quite some time to pick up on the nuances of Anger's desire, symbolic visuals, and interactions with the sailor figure before coming to grips with the diegesis. But by limning the image of the sailor through a direct reference to Man Ray's photo and, further, by deploying the parable of the Minotaur that locates the beast as central to desire, Anger *does* imagine a shared framework through which his film is legible: the Surrealist avant-garde. Though probably horrifying to the "mass" audiences Tyler describes in *Magic and Myth of the Movies*, Anger's film indulges the "imaginative truth" of Surrealists and members of the avant-garde who did understand the Minotaur as integral to psychic exploration and libidinal drive. This is not to say that Tyler and Jung's idealistic conceptions of myth as inherent to all people are rendered incorrect by Anger's film. Rather, whereas Hollywood directors use particular narrative conventions to appeal to mass audiences, Anger uses the stylistic language of Surrealism and avant-garde film practice to appeal to a more niche audience—Anger's film involves the "conscious"

[82] Carl Jung, ibid, 24-5.

language that art demands—breaking from both Tyler's unconscious transmission of myth present in Hollywood films and from Jung's language-less subjective fantasy.[83] But for the audience familiar with Anger's references and specific understanding of the Minotaur, the film speaks to a figure indicative of unconscious desire and psychological analysis.

Following the playfully illusive and allusive Minotaur-sailor image, a belligerent sailor finally indulges Anger's desire for a lite in the goofy form of a flaming bale of sticks, to which Anger delicately joins his cigarette. The adventurous music – a bright echoing between strings and horns – fades out abruptly and the camera jumps from a profile of Anger, weak at the knees in desperate posture, to a close-up shot from just below his chest. He stares downward into his lit cigarette, toward the camera, then draws it away with a limp wrist, blowing the smoke out from his nose. Even if the sex act remains unfulfilled, the light illuminates his desire to him, literally answering the call from the little U.S. NAVY matchbook in his bedroom.

II. ROLE/PLAY

In its inaugural year, Clara Grossman's gallery featured Man Ray prominently: She showed his work, commissioned him to lecture, and brought him into the small avant-garde community developing in wartime Hollywood's booming network of émigrés and young artists.[84] Man Ray's possible influence and connection with Anger is intriguing when considering the avenues of information he could have imparted in his lectures and work, particularly in the ways Man Ray could have been a conduit from Anger to figures of the European avant-garde that were less well-known in the United

[83] Parker Tyler, *Magic and Myth,* ibid, x-xi.
[84] David E. James, *The Most Typical Avant-Garde*, ibid, 216-217.

States, like Georges Bataille.[85] Though Bataille never wrote for *Minotaure*, his interest in the myth of the labyrinth, and his earlier work on mutilation, the Minotaur, and the birth of art were thoroughly recorded in his own publication, *Documents*, which ran in France from 1929 through 1930. Though there exists no evidence of a physical or personal link between Bataille's ideas and Anger's film, Bataille's ideas provide a framework for understanding how Anger's narrative of being maimed by a sailor fits in with some Surrealist constellations of selfhood, sexuality, and sadism. All of this is directed at the assumption, which Anger exemplifies through his editing and narrative, that his sadomasochistic dream experience is the final element of his psychosexual ritual, and therefore crucial to his development.

Anger composes his mutilatory encounter with the sailor through a fantastic, extended montage of displaced symbols signifying the tension between pain and pleasure that drives his erotic playtime. The most remarkable contribution Bataille offers to a reading of *Fireworks* is perhaps through his own Ur myth of the inception of art. In *Les Larmes d'Eros*, published in 1961, a year before his death, Bataille explains the cave paintings at Lascaux – a veritable labyrinth – where the "ithyphallic" man slaughters a Minotaur-like bull, and lies, maybe dead, next to his prey. He claims that the image represents the first act of art, revealing an intimate link between violent slaughter, or mutilation, and eroticism, living together at the center of the cave, or labyrinth, with the Minotaur.[86] The ithyphallic man is analogous to the artist, undertaking a journey through

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[85] For more information on the connections between Man Ray and Georges Bataille, see Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1985).

[86] Georges Bataille, *The Tears of Eros,* trans. Peter Connor (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1989, 49-50. Originally published as *Les Larmes d'Eros* (Paris: Jean-Jacques Pauvert, 1961). This was also the subject of an earlier and less developed book of his entitled, *Lascaux or The Birth of Art*, trans. Austryn Wainhouse (Geneva: Skira, 1955). This Ur myth of the origins of artistic practice is in contrast to that of Narcissus, who reproduced his likeness.

opaque darkness to meet and battle with her or his libido, in the shape of the abject Minotaur. More than a hunting scene, the mêlée between the man and the Minotaur, with the man on the brink of death, is an image of true eroticism, tying libido to death, sacrifice, and creation.

Though not yet explicated with the perfect evidence provided by Lascaux, Bataille had been approaching the connection between artistic production, mutilation, sexuality, and base substances for decades before 1961. One of many Surrealists inspired by Marcel Mauss' interest in the slaughterhouse, Bataille used this idea to render mutilation a sacred act of sacrifice necessary to the creation of significant beauty.[87] In an essay published in *Documents* in 1930, Bataille uses Mauss to perform a series of close readings of Van Gogh's paintings and letters, comparing them with shocking incident reports of self-mutilation and anthropological studies of ceremonial sacrifice. The sacrificial aspect of self-mutilation is the compulsion towards self-revelation, wherein the mutilator realizes the inadequacy of her or his wholeness, and uses dissection to find perfection in the small matter. In the case study of Van Gogh, Bataille realizes it was Van Gogh's relationship with Gauguin that taxed his sense of self and artistic worth. Gauguin was "the most exalted aspirations of Van Gogh's *ego*," to the point of bitter humiliation.[88] Van Gogh could not stand his inherent insufficiency next to the model he saw in Gauguin— a relationship Bataille identifies as the painter regarding his *ideal*, analogous to that of ancient figures to their Gods and Goddesses. So, for Bataille, Van Gogh's auto-

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[87] Janine Mileaf, *Please Touch: Dada and Surrealist Objects After the Readymade* (Lebanon: Dartmouth College Press, 2010), 208n6.
Denis Holier, *Against Architecture: The Writings of Georges Bataille*, trans. Betsy Wing (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1989, originally published Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1974), xii-xiii.

[88] Georges Bataille, "Sacrificial Mutilation and the Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh," in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* trans Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie Jr. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1985, essay originally published in *Documents* 8, 1930), 66.

mutilation was an act of sacrifice similar to ancient man's sacrifice for their deities, forfeiting his ear in a humble admission of inadequacy, desperately seeking artistic virtue.

It follows, then, that Van Gogh's act of auto-mutilative sacrifice, performed out of humiliated inferiority, *perpetuates* a belief in the ideal, complete self. It is Van Gogh's confidence in perfection, or the vision of it, that constantly inscribes Van Gogh's subservience to Gauguin. "Mutilation normally intervened in these relations as sacrifice," an act driven by "*an inner experience,*" undoubtedly related to the concepts of selfhood and "*ipseity*" which later occupy his writings.[89] The function of sacrifice, he writes, is the "radical alteration of the person" associated with any other major change in an individual's life. At the center of his study and, really, his advocacy for mutilation as a mode of sacrifice, exists not only a servile relationship to a religious power, but rather an image of idealism that the sacrificed, self-mutilator projects from their *ego*. The act of mutilation frees the self from an image of a homogenous, contained body, permitting "heterogeneous" elements to escape and offering total freedom to the individual. As an example of auto-mutilation Bataille cites the myth of Prometheus, whose liver is torn nightly from his insides by his eagle avatar, and the two "ceaselessly" vomit their shared self into "mythical delirium."[90]

But Bataille was also fervently anti-idealism, so though his notion of mutilation's potential is *idealizing*, he does not imagine mutilation's result as a single, perfect image. "Heterogeneity" was a term he designated for matter both holy and foul—particles so small, base, and broken down that it is impossible to compare against others. In effect, horizontality levels all ideal objects into a flat field of equality; nothing is less or more sacred than anything else. Thus the "horizontal" for Bataille is an increasingly important

[89] Bataille, "Sacrificial Mutilation," ibid, 67.
[90] Bataille, "Sacrificial Mutilation," ibid, 70.

and ideal vision of existence. When auto-mutilators offer cuts of their body to the image of their ideal, it is a desperate assertion that the mutilator's heterogeneous matter is equal to that of the ideal. In Bataille's own words, the act shapes "the close identification of the one who humiliates with the one who is humiliated."[91] In that position, the mutilated should become free from the idealism that creates their inferiority in the first place, all matter released into a horizontal plane, where it remains unreadable and formless. That is to say, the only way Van Gogh can escape the humiliation he faces from Gauguin's image is his mutilation, which in turn is necessary for radical revelation in his art.

Kenneth Anger's mythic Minotaur and sadomasochistic climax in *Fireworks* differ from Bataille's earlier and concurrent work on Van Gogh and Lascaux. Though Anger may have seen images of the paintings at Lascaux, which were unearthed in 1940 and circulated in images all over the world, his scene is entirely different from the one Bataille describes.[92] Instead of the artist slaughtering the Minotaur, or Anger overpowering the sailor, it is the Minotaur overpowering Anger—the formula is inverted. And, though the mythic Minotaur-sailor stands as a glowing, ideal form toward which Anger's libido drives him, like Van Gogh's image of Gauguin, the dreamer in *Fireworks* does not so much envy the sailor as much as he needs the seaman to fulfill his desire. Even if the displaced evidence of Anger's erotic fantasy initially embarrasses him, he is far from humiliated by the sheer presence of the sailor—he is more in a state of disbelief over the figure's perfection. Further, the mutilation Anger's character eventually endures is not technically self-mutilation. Anger directs it, and certainly enjoys it; but his sacrifice is more that of mutilation performed by the Minotaur at the center of the cave. But similar to the caves at Lascaux, Anger's mutilation constitutes his artistic work. Refusing

[91] Bataille, "Sacrificial Mutilation," ibid, 66.
[92] Bataille, *The Tears of Eros,* ibid, 36.

the wholeness or "homogeneity" ascribed to being, and using mutilation as a mode of pleasure and sacrifice to free oneself is perhaps a declaration in line with Anger's earlier projections of seeing: that a thing can be something beyond what the eye perceives, and this openness frees the self from the oppressive controls of reality.

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After chasing him in a pack, the sailors grab Anger and throw him across the length of the frame, eagerly assaulting him. He remains below the lens of the camera, just out of frame, so as the actions directed at Anger are performed off screen. They push and pull, eventually discarding Anger's shirt. Finally the film cuts to a close-up shot of Anger, who lies on cold, wet concrete, his head upside down into frame. Not unlike the earlier shots of him sleeping in his bed, he remains naked, passive, and largely motionless. As his eyeballs roll up a hand reaches straight down into frame, as if directly from his torso, and forces its index and middle fingers into his nostrils. Anger blinks, loses control, and a dark fluid jets abruptly out of his mouth, landing in an almost concentric formation on his face before dripping away with the movement of his tense, toothy grimace and squinting eyes. Though inaudible, he screams desperately, the outline of his mouth reaching to the corners of his face, the arteries bulging from his neck. The shots are fragmented, fast, and tight, to the point where the camera does not capture the Anger actually receiving the blows from the sailor. Similarly, the frame excludes the image of whoever sticks their fingers up Anger's nose to cause the eruption. The effect is a focus on Anger's pathos drawn through close-up.

Continuing in this vein, the film cuts to an image of the sailor, his torso extending up into the frame, above the camera's lens, with his face largely obscured by shadows. He mercilessly pulls Anger's wrist into frame, which writhes in protest, as if his body is splitting in half. The screen returns to the upside down close-up of Anger's face. Faster

than is comprehensible, something clubs him on each side of his head— now clear of the dark liquid that shot from his nose. The film cuts back to another upward angled shot of the sailor, who slams something down – perhaps just his fist – against the bottom edge of the screen's frame— a hit that clearly would not actually reach Anger lying on the ground. Just as his force reaches the edge of the frame, the shot returns to Anger shuddering, squinting and tensing his whole face to manage the pain. Again something hits him directly on the side of the face so swiftly it remains imperceptible.

All the while Anger's screams and protestations remain ambiguous and silent, and indeed the sailor labors with his strikes well beyond the perceivable impact and heft of the chains, which appear weightless and fake. Upon a first viewing, the fast changing shots make this playful trace almost indiscernible, forcing the viewer to rely on the more obvious narrative of an assault, aided by the menacing sound of the deep horns. But in addition to presenting shocking and horrifying visuals, the sequence manifests discreet indications of *play*, and further, pleasure. For example, as the ghostly fingers reach down to penetrate Anger's nostrils, His face progresses from lifeless, to unexpected shock, to momentary pain, and finally to a tense, almost imperceptible grin [Figure 11]. The disembodied hand mirrors the earlier castrated plaster one, displaced to represent Anger's unconscious yearning for domination and the phallus—here he experiences both. The experience of his base humiliation, mutilation, and submission are more than just closely tied to his sense of joy. The two opposing forces flux rapidly in their manifestations on his face, making any sense of stable emotion difficult to glean and proposing that in fact, one is inclusive of the other. These two feelings are intimate at their most basic levels—a true horizontality of the self.

The film returns to the upside-down close-up of Anger, but from a slightly diagonal angle. More dark fluid squirts onto his face as he silently yelps frantically, in

ecstasy, as his body convulses to where his neck arches and his head scrapes up and down the concrete surface on which he lies. The camera focuses on his facial reaction, denying a view of the abuse that causes the pain. Once again the camera returns to the sailor holding Anger's outstretched wrist, restraining him to make him available for physical beating. This time the sailor himself extends his free arm to reveal a loose chain, holding it back in a pitching position, though the apparatus itself flops around easily, contradicting the arduous pose of the sailor that suggests massive weight. The camera cuts back to Anger before the sailor strikes, but this time he is on his side, the camera catching the strained, open expression of his mouth down through the top of his shoulder. The camera returns to the sailor, filmed from below, maniacally whipping the chain downward, out of frame. Diminutive in length, the chain seems innocuous and weightless, but the sailor handles it with aggressive force—a funny scalar interruption to the scene's violence. Much like the earlier shot of Anger's smile sneaking through, the sailor's face contorts itself so dramatically that, in conjunction with the clear artifice of his weapon, the action reads as unbelievable.

The editing's fast image rotation and the camerawork also disrupt a sense of watching a "real" violent act – versus a playful enactment. In all of the shots, the editing moves ahead or behind the actors' motions by cutting to another image before the actual blow or violent act. Or, conversely, the camera remains on Anger, but cuts the point of impact out of frame, totally omitting the actual blows and capturing only the before and after. The chain actually hitting Anger is never shown. Nor are the sailor and Anger ever sharing the same frame, which would technically cement the power struggle into a unified visual construction. The camera focuses on capturing the separate emotional roles that the actors maintain throughout, allowing for ambiguity in the exact feelings that the camera captures, slipping between pain/malice, and pleasure/fun.

The relationship enacted here, which refuses distinction between the primal modes of pleasure, pain, and play, proposes a multivalent bond between surrealism and sadomasochism. Most basically, the overlap of play as a critical original tenet of surrealism enacted by Breton in his first *Manifesto*, and the "play" that designates the roles of sadomasochism – literally, "roleplay" – where each partner embodies a character for fun and pleasure, invariably toying with power dynamics as a source of sexual drive.[93] Reading Leo Bersani's evaluation of Freud's *Three Essays* reminds us how much the overlap between childhood and sexuality was a fixation of Freud's, surely later embedded in the Surrealist obsession with both childhood and unconscious libidinal drive. But Freud concerns himself primarily with the pre-pubescent stage, Bersani argues, where he reckons the *excitation* of erotogenic zones exists separately from the end-pleasure of orgasm. The division of sexual into two stages – excitement and extinction – opens for Freud a space to ponder the nature of the pure, erotogenic excitation, separate from the extinctive end-pleasure; a question which for Bersani, is the truest origin of "sexuality."[94]

But curiously, Freud evades pursuing the basic question of primary sexual excitation. Bersani considers Freud's avoidance as a confused refusal to acknowledge the inevitable: that at the root of sexuality, inside the space of erogenous excitation, exists a codependent tension between pain and pleasure, one not at all oriented toward its release, but rather its intensification.[95] Sexuality, distinct from satisfaction, is the repetition and reproduction of *pain*, an admission that would undo the teleological assumption of Freud: that the progression of sexuality is that of a baby to an adult, where the post-adolescent

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[93] Though Breton's tone in his text is quite serious, he valorizes madness, childhood, and the imagination, and demonstrates a poetry game that yields goofy results. Breton, "Manifesto," ibid, 41-43.

[94] Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 33-34.

[95] Though Freud recognizes the component characteristic of tension, he never steps back to explicitly draw out its implications.

experiences pleasure and becomes sexually excited for the exterminating release of orgasm. Instead, Bersani's model posits pain, as a cycle of excitement to be only intensified—the most critical, important part of "sexuality."[96]

Sadomasochism, then, comes to the fore. The process that distinguishes childhood from adulthood is that of the structuring and formation of the ego: When tension and fulfillment, which exist independently from each other in the child, join to shape the causal process of tension *leading* to fulfillment. So, the experience of pain as a sexual end in itself is not only the heart of sexuality, but it exists as an outlier to Freud's studies because its qualitative properties live outside the structured organization of the ego. The child, concludes Bersani, with their unstructured ego, remains outside this tautological reading, and thus sadomasochism is a mode of accessing this prestructured mode of sexual pleasure. Freud fears the criticality of sadomasochism to sexuality, as it exists outside the structured self—the basis of his theory of sexual normalcy and development.[97]

Thus it is no coincidence that Anger encounters his fantasy of cruelty, his deepest form of sexuality, in the surreal space of his unconscious, where he accesses his own unstructured self—the goal of Surrealist, libidinal drive.[98] Bersani's ideas also overlap with Bataille's: it is outside the structure of the ego, in a mutilated, formless self, illegible to empiricism and analysis, where the heart of sexuality resides. On these terms, Anger's sexual passage is that of an *unstructuring* of his ego—refusing parameters of adulthood and selfhood to find true pleasure and a freer mode of being. The montage continues with fast cuts jumping from image to image, which intensify into white fluid pouring over his

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[96] Bersani, *The Freudian Body,* ibid, 34, 37.
[97] Bersani, *The Freudian Body*, ibid, 38-39.
[98] Breton, "Manifesto," ibid, 4-5.

face, the slicing of his nipple, and the unpacking of his guts to reveal a round, ticking meter, all accompanied by the loudest, most triumphant procession music of the entire film.[99] The montage, which begins as an ambiguous beating, becomes the total experience of masochistic joy at the hands of a dominant figure.[100] Play, however, remains integral to this intense and gruesome imagery: The sailor, clothed like he was in the opening scene, breathes with intense purpose and exposes himself with his zipper down, one hand holding a matchbox and the other hand lighting a long Roman candle that juts out from his pubic area. The music reaches an orchestral climax with trilling winds and blasting brass, and the sailor lights the candle and forcefully throws his arms back and then back down, sparks shooting about the frame to cast a brilliant and foggy sheen over the lens. The metaphorical orgasm completes the montage's sadistic theme and marks the most triumphant moment of the film—the literal climax.

Upon the conclusion of the sailor's orgasm and a giant tinseled Christmas tree's symbolic procession back into Anger's bedroom, his ritual concludes. The film returns to the shot of Anger in bed, projecting slightly downward into frame, his naked shoulders reflecting smooth gradients of light that shift with small movements from his trachea. The camera quotes a shot from the first bedroom scene, panning downward from the ceiling, past the fireplace consumed with the flames burning displaced markers of Anger's desire, and then pausing on Anger, who convulses deeply with a blanket halfway up his ribs, his mouth gaping as if moaning in ecstasy. Then the camera continues down to the path where before it met the castrated hand, but this time the camera finds a restless

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[99] Also of import here is the metaphoric and metonymic language through which Anger experiences this pleasure. As I discuss displacement and metaphor in my first chapter, I steer more toward the implications of sadomasochism and myth here, but in a longer more thorough study I would employ a precise reading of the montage, which indeed demonstrates extensive deliberation on Anger's part.

[100] Though Anger's own sexual pleasure does not seem to meet the orgasm that Freud assumes to be the most critical aspect of sex, but the sailor *does*.

Switzer, naked with his face outlined with a luminescent aureole. Finally, the camera completes the shot, finding the plaster hand with *all fingers restored*. The film cuts to a close up of the hand, the camera filming from a low position. Slowly the music lulls, and the hand falls backward into the restless pool of water, into which the sage has totally disintegrated, marking the end of Anger's passage.

Conclusion: Illuminating the Peephole

In a recent interview with *ArtNews*, Kenneth Anger told Nate Freeman, "I was very aware that I was being avant-garde and pushing my way into making art films."[101] But what does the term "avant-garde" mean when considering a high school student in 1940s in Los Angeles? Though I have used concepts from the European avant-garde – Surrealism in particular – as a tool to decipher *Fireworks*, I recognize that to do so is to simplify the state of Los Angeles' own avant-garde in the 1940s and the variegated sources affecting an individual like Kenneth Anger. To zoom out from my scope is to see that Los Angeles was home to its own complex world of cultural production, blending several traditions of the avant-garde with the omnipresent movie industry and burgeoning sexual cultures.

With that in mind, we might find that Anger's use of myth has, in addition to the avant-garde, much to do with Hollywood films. We might also find that his exploration of sadomasochism has as much, if not more, to do with Surrealist ideas of pain and pleasure as it does with nascent homosexual subcultures—Surrealism, Hollywood, and homosexuality were perhaps, to some extent, mutually inclusive.[102] In *The City and the Pillar*, Gore Vidal imagines this mixed scene for his protagonist Jim, a sexually undecided boy living with a somewhat discreet homosexual movie star in the Hollywood hills. Before Jim leaves the actor for a troubled novelist, the couple enjoys throwing parties for a close milieu of renown avant-garde writers, rich Hollywood directors, artists,

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[101] Kenneth Anger, "The Devil in the Details," interview by Nate Freeman, *ArtNews*, Spring 2016, 82.

[102] Initially I was attentive to grasping the presence of sadomasochism *and* navy men in homosexual erotica in the 1940s. The state of this material in Los Angeles' leading Gay and Lesbian Archive, however, lacks attribution, dating, and even acquisition information. Undertaking a project that relies on studying homosexual erotica in Los Angeles in the 1940s as a way in to reconstructing the nuances of homosexual networks would require a massive project to construct a larger, stylistic, connoisseur-driven history of the material.

and working class fairies hoping to edge into the movie industry—the scene is most certainly homosexual, but comprised of individuals steeped in *both* Hollywood commercialism and creative intellectualism associated with the avant-garde.[103] Clara Grossman's gallery is a good model for considering a historical, contemporary, and factual version of this kind of milieu. Though her programming focused on old and foreign films, and avoided blockbusters, her patrons belonged to various categories who socialized in close proximity to each other: including European avant-garde artists, Hollywood heavyweights, and a much younger generation of often homosexual filmmakers – like Anger and Harrington – who would come to profoundly influence the course of experimental film in the United States. The filmic avant-garde in Kenneth Anger's eyes, then, was more than just a continuation and modification of European practice— it had its own form.

Whereas I have sought to find meaning and narrative in both Anger's interactions and the forms of his visual compositions, it is the general theme of *Fireworks* where we can perhaps find the most prominent intersection between mass film culture, sexuality, and the avant-garde. *Fireworks* is much like a diary or personal letter: Anger enacted his own sexual passage for a camera, inscribing his memory of a dream into the reproducible and sharable celluloid of his 16 millimeter camera. The film is indexical to his own experience, ceremonially recording his stylized recreation of his dream, in which he performs his role for both himself and his audience. In 1969 Parker Tyler observed this form of "exhibitionism" as germane to an important, longstanding theme that he

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[103] Gore Vidal, *The City and the Pillar and Seven Early Stories* (New York: Random House, 1995, originally printed New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1948), chapter 4 is where this scene is most evident. Though he would shortly have associations with Hollywood, Vidal was not actually there at this point in time. I do not mean to suggest that Vidal is writing a nonfiction account, just that at this point, commercial Hollywood, the avant-garde, and homosexuality were associated with each other, not considered incompatible.

identified as the "psychodrama:" He writes, "the individual patient tries to explicate his dilemma in terms of pantomime, possibly words too, before a small audience of others like himself: those with similar difficulties."[104] An "American *theater* motif," Tyler finds the psychodrama a medium for the method actor, who *is* who she or he acts on stage, thereby opening their performance up to unscripted chance and the possibility to reveal "social truth."[105] *Fireworks* is neither unscripted nor live, but Anger's aim is similar to that of the method actor: to pantomime his *private* dilemma for a *public* forum, presuming a beneficial outcome in both relaying this truth *and* reenacting it.

It is Tyler's point that the psychodrama "is the nexus between one theatricalism and the other," between "mass entertainment" and "small, populist cults." [106] The psychodrama, then, is less an exclusive technique of any single school, and more a social tool used on behalf of the actor or filmmaker to engage audiences with their films or plays over the intimate and true tendencies of the human psyche. Injected with sexuality into both avant-garde and Hollywood films, the psychodrama presumes a kind of therapeutic environment for the individual actor who rebuilds her or his analyst's couch into the shape of a stage or set, reliving their change, *or* experiencing it anew for their audience. But while the psychodrama aids the actor in engaging their spectator, in *Underground Film* Tyler identifies a similar function belonging to the camera: the peephole. The experience that Kenneth Anger conveys illuminates a taboo realm of reality, offering a voyeuristic peepshow into his bedroom as he awakens, and then, more shockingly, into his dream where he undergoes his fulfilling, pleasurable mutilation. The

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[104] Parker Tyler, *Sex Psyche Etcetera in the Film* (Middlesex and Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1971, originally New York: Horizon Press, 1969), 69. In the case of films that play for large and not small audiences, the small audience the actor performs for is the environment in which the film is made.
[105] Tyler, *Sex Psyche Etcetera*, ibid, 82-3.
[106] Tyler, *Sex Psyche Etcetera,* ibid, 74-5.

peephole of the camera not only promises "reality" – the conviction "where *seeing* is the same as *believing*" – it promises the whole truth of what it records: the camera can indeed capture everything.[107] This peephole, through which the spectator gazes to witness "forbidden things," functions somewhat as an inverse of Tyler's 'astral light' in "The Erotic Spectator," which shines through all of space as a photographic plate, absorbing the light from the unconscious Erotic Spectator to illuminate the shape of her or his desire.[108] Through this peephole, though, the eye of the camera peeps deep into Anger's unconscious, to illuminate the plate that holds the sailor as a mythic creature of desire, presenting for the spectator the forbidden realm of desire. It is the camera's function, here, germane to the school of "Underground" and avant-garde film, to record the realms of reality that are too private, or nestled too deeply into the unconscious, for an audience to share and experience.

The movement to exhibiting the self that Tyler finds so remarkable, of artists, actors, and filmmakers alike, rests on the landscape of mass media and its ability to make the personal into very public, shared narratives. The camera, however, which can literally record the reality in front of it, remained the most potent and powerful of these media for relaying Tyler's ideas about libido, if for no other reason than its automatic implication of truth. Beyond relating to the proliferation of psychoanalysis into the United States' popular conscience, what does it mean that someone like Anger, who is not extraordinarily well trained, invests in recording and sharing this extremely personal dream of his? What does Anger gain from this ritual, and why is it important to constituting his sexual, artistic, and personal identities? Does it affirm a complete

[107] Tyler, *Underground Film*, ibid, 9-11.
[108] Tyler, "The Erotic Spectator, ibid, 75.

transformation into a mature adult, or does is it simply a means to draw himself into dialogue with artistic figures he admires?

It is funny that after spending so much time indulging the territory of fantasies and dreams in *Fireworks*, we conclude with a point about reality and truth. For Tyler, and seemingly for Anger, the mind's fantasy and its unconscious dreams, free of external, material reality, are the truest, most intimate forms of reality. Thus the camera's ability to shape what we see, and the editor's ability to structure and reformat it, are tools for the individual to compose a sincere address of this deep reality to an audience, candidly sharing an experience, and a belief in the weight of using dreams and personal histories to bolster selfhood.

Figures

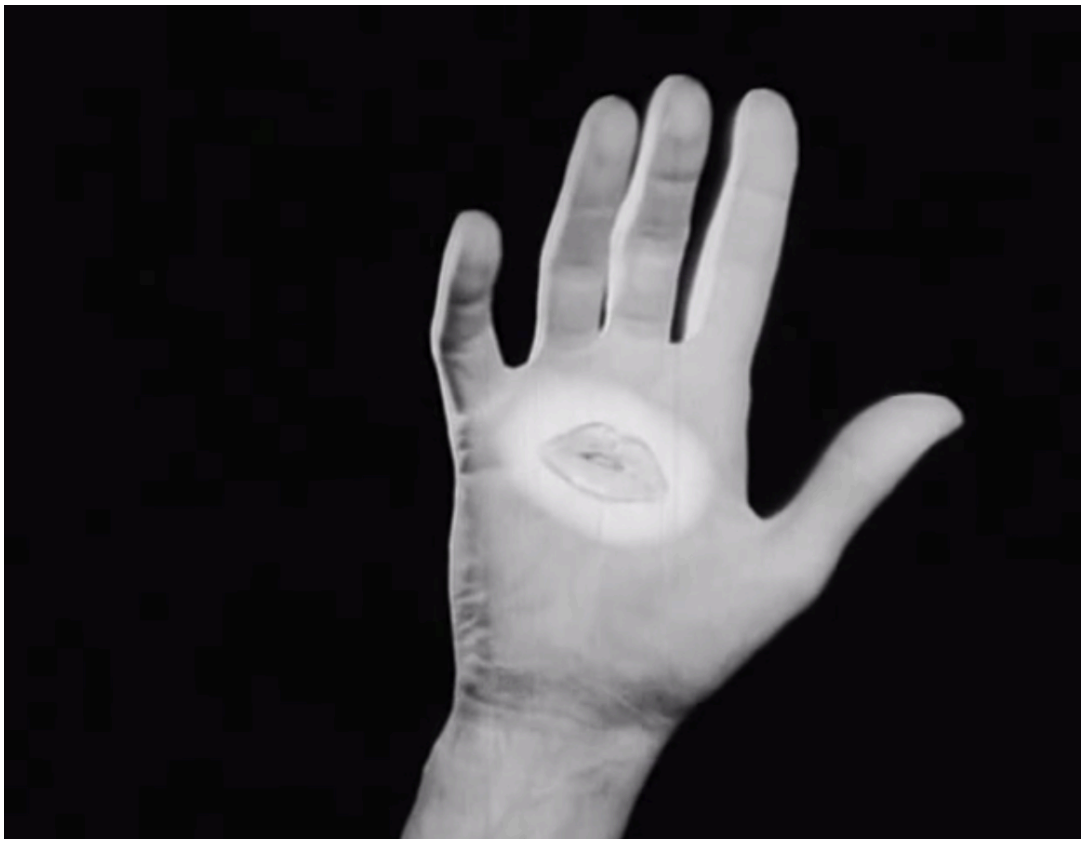

Figure 1. From Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poète*, 1930.

Figure 2. From Cocteau's *Le Sang d'un Poète,* 1930.

Figure 3. Salvador Dalí, *Portrait of Joella,* 1933-1934.

Oil on plaster, wood, and crystal.

15.9 x 6.8 x 7.2 inches

Figure 4. From Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, *Un Chien Andalou,* 1929

Figure 5. From Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel, *Un Chien Andalou*, 1929.

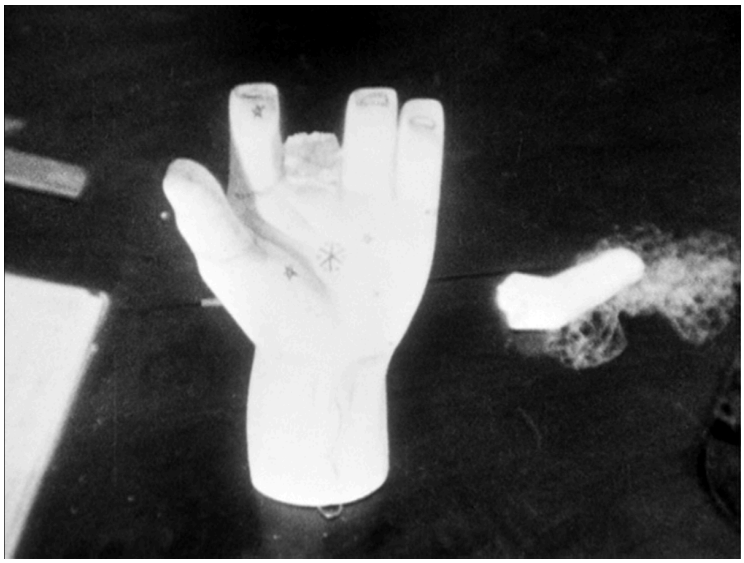

Figure 6. From Kenneth Anger, *Fireworks*, 1947.

Figure 7. From Kenneth Anger, *Fireworks*, 1947.

Figure 8. From Kenneth Anger, *Fireworks*, 1947.

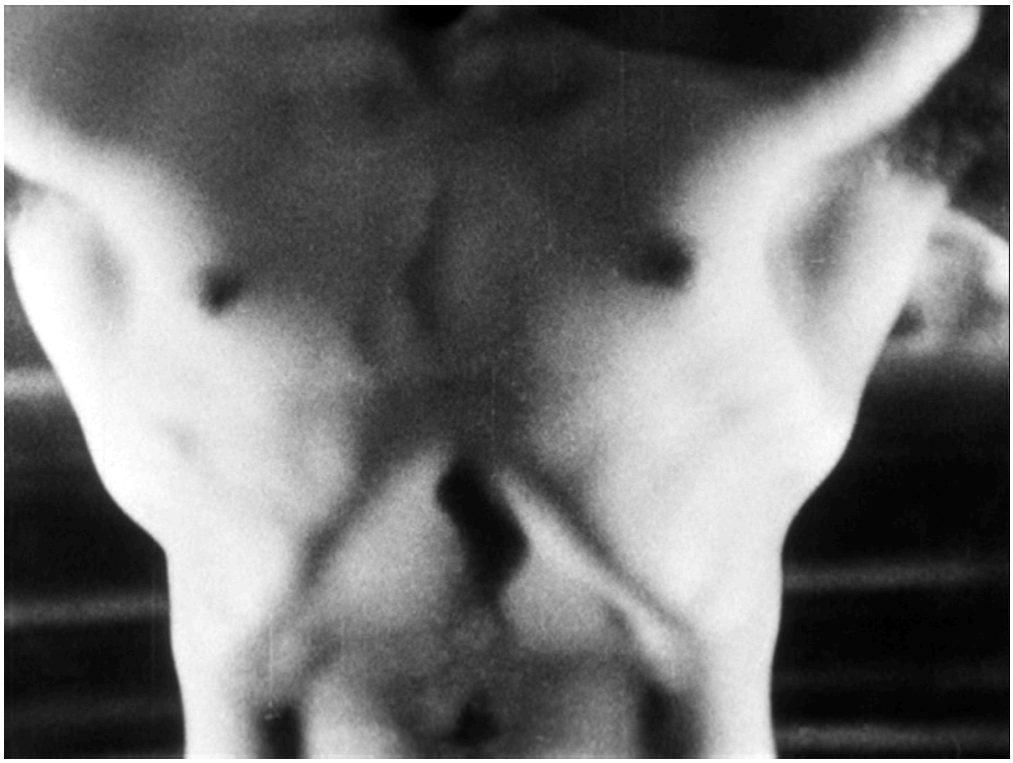

Figure 9. From Kenneth Anger, *Fireworks*, 1947.

Figure 10. Man Ray, *Photograph*. Published in *Minotaure* no. 7 (1935).

Figure 11. From Kenneth Anger, *Fireworks*, 1947.

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